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(and NERO WOLFE)

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(and INSPECTOR
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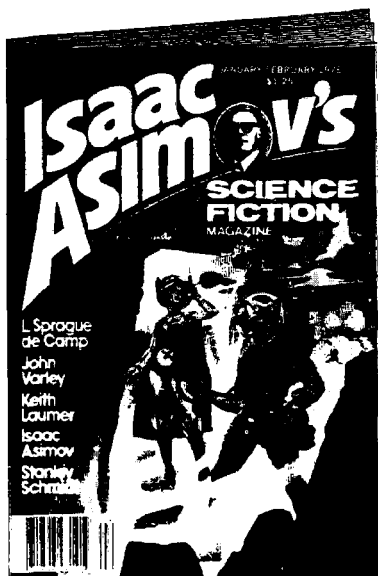
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SPRING-
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1978

EDITED BY

"Ellery Queen"

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Rex Stout

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Detective: NERO WOLFE

I was a little disappointed in Flora Gallant when she arrived that Tuesday morning for her eleven-o'clock appointment with Nero Wolfe. Her getup was a letdown. One of my functions as Wolfe's factotum is checking on people who phone for an appointment with him, and when I had learned that Flora Gallant was one of the staff of her brother Alec's establishment on East Fifty-fourth Street, and remembered remarks a friend of mine named Lily Rowan had made about Alec Gallant, I had phoned Lily for particulars.

And got them. Gallant was crowding two others for top ranking in the world of high fashion. He thumbed his nose at Paris and sneered at Rome, and was getting away with it. He had refused to finish three dresses for the Duchess of Harwynd because she postponed flying over from London for fittings. He declined to make anything whatever for a certain famous movie actress because he didn't like the way she handled her hips when she walked. He had been known to charge as little as \$800 for an afternoon frock, but it had been for a favorite customer so he practically gave it away.

And so forth. Therefore when I opened the door to admit his sis-

ter Flora that Tuesday morning it was a letdown to see a dumpy middle-aged female in a dark gray suit that was anything but spectacular. It needed pressing, and the shoulders were too tight, and her waist wasn't where it thought it was. As I ushered her down the hall to the office and introduced her to Wolfe, I was thinking that if the shoemaker's son went barefoot I supposed his sister could too, but all the same I felt cheated.

Her conversation was no more impressive than her costume, at least at the beginning. Seated on the edge of the red leather chair beyond the end of Wolfe's desk, the fingers of both hands gripping the rim of the gray leather bag on her lap, she apologized, in a low meek mumble with just a trace of a foreign accent, for asking such an important man as Nero Wolfe to give any of his valuable time to her and her troubles. That didn't sound promising, indicating as it did that she was looking for a bargain. As she went on with it Wolfe started a frown going, and soon he cut her off by saying that it would take less of his time if she would tell him what her troubles were.

She nodded. "I know. I just wanted you to understand that I don't expect anything for myself. I'm not anybody myself, but you know who my brother is? My brother Alec?"

"Yes. Mr. Goodwin has informed me. An illustrious dressmaker."

"He is not merely a dressmaker. He is an artist, a great artist." She wasn't arguing, just stating a fact. "This trouble is about him, and that's why I must be careful with it. That's why I come to you, and also"—she sent me a glance and then back to Wolfe—"also Mr. Archie Goodwin, because I know that although you are private detectives, you are gentlemen. I know you are worthy of confidence."

She stopped, apparently for acknowledgement. Wolfe obliged her. "Umph."

"Then it is understood I am trusting you?"

"Yes. You may."

She looked at me. "Mr. Goodwin?"

"Right. Whatever Mr. Wolfe says. I only work here."

She hesitated, seeming to consider if that was satisfactory, decided it was, and returned to Wolfe. "So I'll tell you. I must explain that in France, where my brother and I were born and brought up, our name was not 'Gallant.' What it was doesn't matter. I came to this country in nineteen-thirty-seven, when I was

twenty-five years old, and Alec only came in nineteen-forty-five, after the war was over. He had changed his name to Gallant and entered legally under that name. Within seven years he had made a reputation as a designer, and then—Perhaps you remember his fall collection in nineteen-fifty-three?"

Wolfe grunted no.

Her right hand abandoned its grip on the bag to gesture. "But of course you are not married, and you have no mistress, feeling as you do about women. That collection showed what my brother was—an artist, a true creator. He got financial backing, more than he needed, and opened his place on Fifty-fourth Street. I had quit my job four years earlier—my job as a governess—in order to work with him and help him, and had changed my name to have it the same as his. From nineteen-fifty-three on it has been all a triumph, many triumphs. I will not say I had a hand in them, but I have been trying to help in my little way. The glory of great success has been my brother's, but I have been with him, and so have others. Now trouble has come."

Both hands were gripping the bag again. "The trouble," she said, "is a woman. A woman named Bianca Voss."

Wolfe made a face. She saw it and responded to it. "No, not an *affaire d'amour*, I'm sure it's not that. Though my brother has never married, he is by no means insensible to women, he is very healthy about women, but since you are worthy of confidence I may tell you that he has an *amie intime*, a young woman who is of importance in his establishment. It is impossible that Bianca Voss has attracted him that way. She first came there a little more than a year ago. My brother had told us to expect her, so he had met her somewhere. He designed a dress and a suit for her, and they were made there in the shop, but no bill was ever sent her.

"Then he gave her one of the rooms on the third floor, and she started to come every day, and then the trouble began. My brother never told us she had any authority, but she took it and he allowed her to. Sometimes she interferes directly, and sometimes through him. She pokes her nose into everything. She got my brother to discharge a fitter, a very capable woman, who had been with him for years. She has a private telephone line in her office upstairs, but no one else has. About two months ago some of the others persuaded me to try to find out about her, what her standing is, and I asked my brother, but he wouldn't tell me. I

begged him to, but he wouldn't."

"It sounds," Wolfe said, "as if she owns the business. Perhaps she bought it."

Flora Gallant shook her head. "No, she hasn't. I'm sure she hasn't. She wasn't one of the financial backers in nineteen-fifty-three, and since then there have been good profits, and anyway my brother has control. But now she's going to ruin it and he's going to let her, we don't know why. She wants him to design a factory line to be promoted by a chain of department stores using his name. She wants him to sponsor a line of Alec Gallant cosmetics on a royalty basis. And other things. We're against all of them, and my brother is too, really, but we think he's going to give in to her, and that will ruin it."

Her fingers tightened on the bag. "Mr. Wolfe, I want you to ruin *her*."

Wolfe grunted. "By wiggling a finger?"

"No, but you can. I'm sure you can. I'm sure she has some hold on him, but I don't know what. I don't know who she is or where she came from. I don't know what her real name is. She speaks with an accent, but not French; I'm not sure what it is. I don't know when she came to America; she may be here illegally. She may have known my brother in France, during the war. You can find out. If she has a hold on my brother you can find out what it is. If she is blackmailing him, isn't that against the law? Wouldn't that ruin her?"

"It might. It might ruin him too."

"Not unless you betrayed him." She swallowed that and added hastily, "I don't mean that, I only mean I am trusting you, you said I could, and you could make her stop and that's all you would have to do. Couldn't you just do that?"

"Conceivably." Wolfe wasn't enthusiastic. "I fear, madam, that you're biting off more than you can chew. The procedure you suggest would be prolonged, laborious, and extremely expensive. It would probably require elaborate investigation abroad. Aside from my fee, which would not be modest, the outlay would be considerable and the outcome highly uncertain. Are you in a position to undertake it?"

"I am not rich myself, Mr. Wolfe. I have some savings. But my brother—if you get her away, if you release him from her—he is truly *généreux*—excuse me—he is a generous man. He is not stingy."

"But he isn't hiring me, and your assumption that she is galling him may be groundless." Wolfe shook his head. "No. Not a reasonable venture. Unless, of course, your brother himself consults me. If you care to bring him? Or send him?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" She gestured again. "You must see that isn't possible! When I asked him about her, I told you, he wouldn't tell me anything. He was annoyed. He is never abrupt with me, but he was then. I assure you, Mr. Wolfe, she is a villain. You are *sagace*—excuse me—you are an acute man. You would know it if you saw her, spoke with her."

"Perhaps." Wolfe was getting impatient. "Even so, my perception of her villainy wouldn't avail. No, madam."

"But you would know I am right." She opened her bag, fingered in it with both hands, came out with something, left her chair to step to Wolfe's desk, and put the something on his desk pad in front of him. "There," she said. "That is one hundred dollars. For you that is nothing, but it shows how I am in earnest. I can't ask her to come so you can speak with her, she would merely laugh at me, but you can. You can tell her you have been asked in confidence to discuss a matter with her and ask her to come to see you. You will not tell her what it is. She will come, she will be afraid not to, and that alone will show you she has a secret, perhaps many secrets. Then when she comes you will ask her whatever occurs to you. For that you do not need my suggestions. You are an acute man."

Wolfe grunted. "Everybody has secrets."

"Yes," she agreed, "but not secrets that would make them afraid not to come to see Nero Wolfe. When she comes and you have spoken with her, we shall see. That may be all or it may not. We shall see."

I do not say that the hundred bucks there on his desk in used twenties was no factor in Wolfe's decision. Even though income tax would reduce it to sixteen dollars, that would buy four days' supply of beer. Another factor was plain curiosity: would she come or wouldn't she? Still another was the chance that it might develop into a decent fee.

But what really settled it was her saying, "We shall see" instead of "We'll see" or "We will see." He will always stretch a point, within reason, for people who use words as he thinks they should be used. So he muttered at her, "Where is she?"

"At my brother's place. She always is."

"Give Mr. Goodwin the phone number."

"I'll get it. She may be downstairs." She started a hand for the phone on Wolfe's desk, but I told her to use mine and left my chair, and she came and sat, lifted the receiver, and dialed.

In a moment she spoke. "Doris? Flora. Is Miss Voss around? . . . Oh. I thought she might have come down. . . . No, don't bother, I'll ring her there."

She pushed the button down, told us, "She's up in her office," waited a moment, released the button, and dialed again. When she spoke it was another voice, as she barely moved her lips and brought it out through her nose: "Miss Bianca Voss? Hold the line, please. Mr. Nero Wolfe wishes to speak with you. . . . Mr. Nero Wolfe, the private detective."

She looked at Wolfe and he got at his phone. Having my own share of curiosity, I extended a hand for my receiver, and she let me take it and left my chair. As I sat and got it to my ear Wolfe was speaking.

"This is Nero Wolfe. Is this Miss Bianca Voss?"

"Yes." It was more like "yiss." "What do you want?" The "wh" and the "w" were off.

"If my name is unknown to you, I should explain—"

"I know your name. What do you want?"

"I want to invite you to call on me at my office. I have been asked to discuss certain matters with you, and—"

"Who asked you?"

"I am not at liberty to say."

"What matters?" The "wh" was more off.

"If you will let me finish. The matters are personal and confidential, and concern you closely. That's all I can say on the telephone. I am sure you—"

A snort stopped him, a snort that might be spelled "Tzchaahh!" followed by: "I know your name, yes! Your are scum, I know, in your stinking sewer! Your slimy little ego in your big gob of fat! And you dare to—owulgggh!"

That's the best I can do at spelling it. It was part scream, part groan, and part just noise. It was followed immediately by another noise, a mixture of crash and clatter, then others, faint rustlings, and then nothing. I looked at Wolfe and he looked at me. I spoke to my transmitter. "Hello hello hello. *Hello! Hello!*"

I cradled it and so did Wolfe. Flora Gallant was asking, "What is it? She hung up?"

We ignored her. Wolfe said, "Archie? You heard."

"Yes, sir. If you want a guess, something hit her and she dragged the phone along as she went down and it struck the floor. The other noises, not even a guess, except that at the end either she put the receiver back on and cut the connection or someone else did. I don't—Okay, Miss Gallant. Take it easy."

She had grabbed my arm with both hands and was jabbering, "What is it? What happened?" I put a hand on her shoulder and made it emphatic. "Take a breath and let go. You heard what I told Mr. Wolfe. Apparently something fell on her and then hung up the phone."

"But it couldn't! It is not possible!"

"That's what it sounded like. What's the number? The one downstairs?"

She just gawked at me. I looked at Wolfe and he gave me a nod, and I jerked my arm loose, sat at my desk, got the Manhattan book, flipped to the Gs and got the number, PL2-0330, and dialed it.

A cultured female voice came. "Alec Gallant, Incorporated."

"This is a friend of Miss Voss," I told her. "I was just speaking to her on the phone, in her office, and from the sounds I got I think something may have happened to her. Will you send someone up to see? Right away. I'll hold the wire."

"Who is this speaking, please?"

"Never mind that. Step on it. She may be hurt."

I heard her calling to someone, then apparently she covered the transmitter. I sat and waited. Wolfe sat and scowled at me. Flora Gallant stood for a good five minutes at my elbow, staring down at me, then turned and went to the red leather chair and lowered herself onto its edge. I looked at my wrist watch: 11:40. It had said 11:31 when the connection with Bianca Voss had been cut. More waiting, and then a male voice came.

"Hello?"

"Hello."

"This is Carl Drew. What is your name, please?"

"My name is Watson, John H. Watson. Is Miss Voss all right?"

"May I have your address, Mr. Watson, please?"

"What for? Miss Voss knows my address. Is she all right?"

"I must have your address, Mr. Watson. I must insist. You will understand the necessity when I tell you that Miss Voss is dead. She was assaulted in her office and is dead. Apparently, from

what you said, the assault came while she was on the phone with you, and I want your address. I must insist."

I hung up, gently not to be rude, swiveled, and asked Flora Gallant, "Who is Carl Drew?"

"He's the business manager. What happened?"

I went to Wolfe. "My guess was close. Miss Voss is dead. In her office. He said she was assaulted, but he didn't say with what or by whom."

He glowered at me, then turned to let her have it. She was coming up from the chair, slow and stiff. When she was erect she said, "No. No. It isn't possible."

"I'm only quoting Carl Drew," I told her.

"It isn't possible. He said that?"

"Distinctly."

"But how—" She let it hang. She said, "But how—" stopped again, turned, and was going. When Wolfe called to her, "Here, Miss Gallant, your money," she paid no attention but kept on, and he poked it at me, and I took it and headed for the hall. I caught up with her halfway to the front door, but when I offered it she just kept going, so I blocked her off, took her bag and opened it and dropped the bills in and closed it, handed it back, and went and pulled the door open. She hadn't said a word.

I stood on the sill and watched, thinking she might stumble going down the seven steps of the stoop, but she made it to the sidewalk and turned east, toward Ninth Avenue. When I got back to the office Wolfe was sitting with his eyes closed, breathing down to his big round middle. I went to my desk and put the phone book away.

"She is so stunned with joy," I remarked, "that she'll probably get run over. I should have gone and put her in a taxi."

He grunted.

"One thing," I remarked, "Miss Voss's last words weren't exactly *généreux*. I would call them catty."

He grunted.

"Another thing," I remarked, "in spite of the fact that I was John H. Watson on the phone, we'll certainly be called on by either Sergeant Stebbins or Inspector Cramer or both. When they go into whereabouts, Flora will have to cough it up for her own protection. And we actually heard it. Also we'll have the honor of being summoned to the stand. Star witnesses."

He opened his eyes. "I'm quite aware of it," he growled. "Con-

found it. Bring me the records on *Laelia gouldiana*."

No orchid ever called a genius a slimy little ego in a big gob of fat. I remarked that too, but to myself.

"Sure I appreciate it," Cramer declared. "Why shouldn't I? Very thoughtful of you. Saves me time and trouble. So it was eleven thirty-one when you heard the blow?"

Inspector Cramer, big and brawny with a round red face and all his hair, half of it gray, had nothing to be sarcastic about as he sat in the red leather chair at six thirty that Tuesday afternoon, and he knew it, but he couldn't help it. It was his reaction, not to the present circumstances, but to his memory of other occasions, other experiences he had undergone in that room. He had to admit that we had saved him time and trouble when I had anticipated his visit by typing out a complete report of the session with Flora Gallant that morning, including the dialogue verbatim, and having it ready for him in duplicate, signed by both Wolfe and me. He had skimmed through it first, and then read it slowly and carefully.

"We heard no blow, identifiably," Wolfe objected. His bulk was comfortably arranged in his oversize chair back of his desk. "Mr. Goodwin wrote that statement, but I read it, and it does not say that we heard a blow."

Cramer found the place on page four and consulted it. "Okay. You heard a groan and a crash and rustles. But there *was* a blow. She was hit in the back of the head with a chunk of marble, a paperweight, and then a scarf was tied around her throat to stop her breathing. You say here at eleven thirty-one."

"Not when we heard the groan," I corrected. "After that there were the other noises, then the connection went, and I said hello a few times, which was human but dumb. It was when I hung up that I looked at my watch and saw eleven thirty-one. The groan had been maybe a minute earlier. Say eleven thirty. If a minute is important."

"It isn't. But you didn't hear the blow?"

"Not to recognize it, no."

He went back to the statement, frowning at it, reading the whole first page and glancing at the others. He looked up, at Wolfe. "I know how good you are at arranging words. This implies that Flora Gallant was a complete stranger to you, that you had never had anything to do with her or her brother or any of the

people at that place, but it doesn't say so in so many words. I'd like to know."

"The implication is valid," Wolfe told him. "Except as related in that statement, I have never had any association with Miss Gallant or her brother, or, to my knowledge, with any of their colleagues. Nor has Mr. Goodwin. Archie?"

"Right," I agreed.

"Okay." Cramer folded the statement and put it in his pocket. "Then you had never heard Bianca Voss's voice before and you couldn't recognize it on the phone."

"Of course not."

"And you can't hear it now, since she's dead. So you can't swear it was her talking to you."

"Obviously."

"And that raises a point. If it was her talking to you, she was killed at exactly half-past eleven. Now there are four important people in that organization who had it in for Bianca Voss. They have admitted it. Besides Flora Gallant, there is Anita Prince, fitter and designer, been with Gallant eight years; Emmy Thorne, in charge of contacts and promotion, been with him four years; and Carl Drew, business manager, been with him five years. None of them killed Bianca Voss at half-past eleven.

"From eleven fifteen on, until the call came from a man who said he was John H. Watson, Carl Drew was down on the main floor, constantly in view of four people, two of them customers. From eleven o'clock on Anita Prince was on the top floor, the workshop, with Alec Gallant and two models and a dozen employees. At eleven twenty Emmy Thorne called on a man by appointment at his office on Forty-sixth Street, and was with him and two other men until a quarter to twelve. And Flora Gallant was here with you. All airtight."

"Very neat," Wolfe agreed.

"Yeah. Too damn neat. Of course there may be others who wanted Bianca Voss out of the way, but as it stands now those four are out in front. And they're all—"

"Why not five? Alec Gallant himself?"

"All right, five. They're all in the clear, including him, if she was killed at eleven thirty. So suppose she wasn't. Suppose she was killed earlier. Suppose when Flora Gallant phoned her from here and put you on to talk with her, it wasn't her at all, it was someone else imitating her voice, and she pulled that stunt, the

groan and the other noises, to make you think you had heard the murder at that time."

Wolfe's brows were up. "With the corpse there on the floor."

"Certainly."

"Then you're not much better off. Who did the impersonation? Their alibis still hold for eleven thirty."

"I realize that. But there were nineteen women around there altogether, and a woman who wouldn't commit a murder might be willing to help cover up after it had been committed. You know that."

Wolfe wasn't impressed. "It's very tricky, Mr. Cramer. If you are supposing Flora Gallant killed her, it was elaborately planned. Miss Gallant phoned here yesterday morning to make an appointment for eleven this morning. Did she kill Miss Voss, station someone there beside the corpse to answer the phone, rush down here, and maneuver me into ringing Miss Voss's number? It seems a little far-fetched."

"I didn't say it was Flora Gallant." Cramer hung on. "It could have been any of them. He or she didn't have to know you were going to ring that number. He might have intended to call it himself, before witnesses, to establish the time of the murder, and when your call came, whoever it was there by the phone got rattled and went ahead with the act. There are a dozen different ways it could have happened. Hell, I know it's tricky. I'm not asking you to work your brain on it. You must know why I brought it up."

Wolfe nodded. "Yes, I think I do. You want me to consider what I heard—and Mr. Goodwin. You want to know if we are satisfied that those sounds were authentic. You want to know if we will concede that they might have been bogus."

"That's it. Exactly."

Wolfe rubbed his nose with a knuckle, closing his eyes. In a moment he opened them. "I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Cramer. If they were bogus they were well executed. At the time, hearing them, I had no suspicion that it was flummery. Naturally, as soon as I learned that they served to fix the precise moment of a murder, I knew they were open to question, but I can't challenge them intrinsically. Archie?"

I shook my head. "I pass." To Cramer: "You've read the statement, so you know that right after I heard it my guess was that something hit her and she dragged the phone along as she went

down and it struck the floor. I'm not going to go back on my guess now. As for our not hearing the blow, read the statement. It says that it started out as if it was going to be a scream but then it was a groan. She might have seen the blow coming and was going to scream, but it landed and turned it into a groan, and in that case we wouldn't hear the blow. A chunk of marble hitting a skull wouldn't make much noise. As for supposing she was killed half an hour or so earlier, I phoned within three minutes, or John H. Watson did, and in another six or seven minutes Carl Drew was talking to me, so he must have seen the body, or someone did, not more than five minutes after we heard the groan. Was she twitching?"

"No. You don't twitch long with a scarf as tight as that around your throat."

"What about the Medical Examiner?"

"He got there a little after twelve. With blood he might have timed it pretty close, but there wasn't any. That's out."

"What about the setup? Someone left that room quick after we heard the sounds. If it was the murderer, he or she had to cradle the phone and tie the scarf, but that wouldn't take long. If it was a fill-in, as you want to suppose, all she had to do was cradle the phone. Whichever it was, wasn't there anyone else around?"

"No. If there was, they're saving it. As you know, Bianca Voss wasn't popular around there. Anyway, that place is a mess, with three different elevators, one in the store, one at the back for services and deliveries, and one in an outside hall with a separate entrance so they can go up to the offices without going through the store."

"That makes it nice. Then it's wide-open."

"As wide as a barn door." Cramer stood up. To Wolfe: "So that's the best you can do. You thought the sounds were open to question."

"Not intrinsically. Circumstantially, of course."

"Yeah. Much obliged." He was going. After two steps he turned. "I don't like gags about homicide—murder is no joke; but I can mention that Bianca Voss had you wrong. Scum. Stinking sewer. Orchids don't smell." He went.

Apparently he hadn't really swallowed it that she was already dead when we heard the sounds.

The next morning, Wednesday, eating breakfast in the kitchen

with *The Times* propped up in front of me, which is routine, of course, I read the account of the Bianca Voss murder. There were various details that were news to me, but nothing startling or even helpful. It included the phone call from John H. Watson, but didn't add that he had been identified as Archie Goodwin, and there was no mention of Nero Wolfe. I admit that the cops and the D.A. have a right to save something for themselves, but it never hurts to have your name in the paper, and I had a notion to phone Lon Cohen at the *Gazette* and give him an exclusive. However, I would have to mention it to Wolfe first, so it would have to wait until eleven o'clock.

As a matter of fact, another item in *The Times* came closer to me. Sarah Yare had committed suicide. Her body had been found Tuesday evening in her little walkup apartment on East Thirteenth Street. I had never written a fan letter to an actress, but I had been tempted to a couple of years back when I had seen Sarah Yare in *Thumb a Ride*. The first time I saw it I had a companion, but the next three times I was alone. The reason for repeating was that I had the impression I was infatuated and I wanted to wear it down, but when the impression still stuck after three tries I quit. Actresses should be seen and heard, but not touched. At that, I might have given the impression another test in a year or two if there had been an opportunity, but there wasn't. She quit *Thumb a Ride* abruptly some months later, and the talk was that she was an alco and done for.

So I read that item twice. It didn't say that it had been pronounced suicide officially and finally, since she had left no note, but a nearly empty bourbon bottle had been there on a table, and on the floor by the couch that she had died on there had been a glass with enough left in it to identify the cyanide. The picture of her was as she had been when I had got my impression. I asked Fritz if he had ever seen Sarah Yare, and he asked what movies she had been in, and I said none, she was much too good for a movie.

I didn't get to suggest phoning Lon Cohen to Wolfe because when he came down from the plant rooms at eleven o'clock I wasn't there. As I was finishing my second cup of coffee a phone call came from the District Attorney's office inviting me to drop in, and I went and spent a couple of hours at Leonard Street with an Assistant D.A. named Brill.

When we got through I knew slightly more than I had when we

started, but he didn't. He had a copy of our statement on his desk, and what could I add to that? He had a lot of fun, though. He would pop a question at me and then spend nine minutes studying the statement to see if I had tripped.

Getting home a little before noon, I was prepared to find Wolfe grumpy. He likes me to be there when he comes down from the plant rooms to the office, and while he can't very well complain when the D.A. calls me on business that concerns us, this wasn't our affair. We had no client and no case and no fee in prospect. But I got a surprise. He wasn't grumpy; he was busy. He had the phone book open before him on his desk. He had actually gone to my desk, stooped to get the book, lifted it, and carried it around to his chair. Unheard of.

"Good morning," I said. "What's the emergency?"

"No emergency. I needed to know a number."

"Can I help?"

"Yes. I have instructions."

I sat. He wants you at his level because it's too much trouble to tilt his head back. "Nothing new," I said, "at the D.A.'s office. Do you want a report?"

"No. You will go to Alec Gallant's place on Fifty-fourth Street and speak with Mr. Gallant, his sister, Miss Prince, Miss Thorne, and Mr. Drew. Separately if possible. You will tell each of them—you read *The Times* this morning as usual?"

"Certainly."

"You will tell each of them that I have engaged to make certain inquiries about Miss Sarah Yare, and that I shall be grateful for any information they may be able and willing to furnish. I would like to see any communications they may have received from her—say, in the past month. Don't raise one brow like that. You know it disconcerts me."

"I've never seen you disconcerted yet." I let the brow down a little. "If they ask me who engaged you what do I say?"

"That you don't know. You are merely following instructions."

"If I ask you who engaged you what do you say?"

"I tell you the truth. No one. Or more accurately, I have engaged myself. I think I may have been hoodwinked and I intend to find out. You may be fishing where there are no fish. They may all say they have never had any association with Sarah Yare, and they may not. You will have that in mind and form your conclusions. If any of them acknowledges association with her, pursue it

enough to learn the degree of intimacy, but don't labor it. That can wait until we bait a hook. You are only to discover if there are any fish."

"Now?"

"Yes. The sooner the better."

I stood up. "It may take a while if the cops and the D.A. are working on them, and they probably are. How urgent is it? Do you want progress reports by phone?"

"Not unless you think it necessary. You must get all five of them."

"Right. Don't wait dinner for me." I went.

On the way uptown in the taxi I was using my brain. I will not explain at this point why Wolfe wanted to know if any of the subjects had known Sarah Yare, and if so how well, for two reasons: first, you have certainly spotted it yourself; and second, since I am not as smart as you are, I had not yet come up with the answer. It was underneath. On top, what I was using my brain for, was the phone book. Unquestionably it was connected with his being hoodwinked, since that was what was biting him, and therefore it probably had some bearing on the call that had been made from his office to Bianca Voss, but what could he accomplish by consulting the phone book? For that I had no decent guess, let alone an answer, by the time I paid the hackie at Fifty-fourth and Fifth Avenue.

Alec Gallant, Incorporated, on the north side of the street near Madison Avenue, was no palace, either outside or in. The front was maybe thirty feet, and five feet of that was taken by the separate entrance to the side hall. The show window, all dark green, had just one exhibit: a couple of yards of plain black fabric, silk or rayon or nylon or Orlon or Dacron or cottonon or linenon, draped on a little rack.

Inside, nothing whatever was in sight—that is, nothing to buy. The wall-to-wall carpet was the same dark green as the show window. There were mirrors and screens and tables and ashtrays and a dozen or more chairs, not fancy, more to sit in than to look at. I had taken three steps on the carpet when a woman standing with a man by a table left him to come to meet me. I told her my name and said I would like to see Mr. Gallant. The man, approaching, spoke.

"Mr. Gallant is not available. What do you want?"

That didn't strike me as a very tactful greeting to a man who,

for all he knew, might be set to pay \$800 for an afternoon frock, but of course he had had a tough twenty-four hours, so I kept it pleasant. "I'm not a reporter," I assured him, "or a cop, or a lawyer drumming up trade. I'm a private detective named Archie Goodwin, sent by a private detective named Nero Wolfe to ask Mr. Gallant a couple of harmless questions—not connected with the death of Bianca Voss."

"Mr. Gallant is not available."

I hadn't heard his voice in person before, only on the phone, but I recognized it. Also he looked like a business manager, with his neat well-arranged face; his neat well-made dark suit, and his neat shadow-stripe four-in-hand. He was a little puffy around the eyes, but the city and county employees had probably kept him from getting much sleep.

"May I ask," I asked, "if you are Mr. Carl Drew?"

"Yes I am."

"Then I'm in luck. I was instructed to see five different people here—Mr. Gallant, Miss Gallant, Miss Prince, Miss Thorne, and Mr. Drew. Perhaps we could sit down?"

He ignored that. "See us about what?"

The woman had left us. She was in earshot if her hearing was good, but this was certainly no secret mission, with five of them on the list. "To get information," I told him, "if you have any, about a woman who died yesterday. Not Bianca Voss. Miss Sarah Yare."

"Oh." He blinked. "Yes. That was tragic. Information? What kind of information?"

"I don't exactly know." I was apologetic. "All I know is that someone has engaged Mr. Wolfe to make inquiries about her, and he sent me to ask you people if you had any messages or letters from her in the past month or so, and if so will you let him see them."

"Messages or letters?"

"Right."

"That seems a little—who engaged him?"

"I don't know." I was not permitting my face or voice to show that I had caught sight of a fish. "If you have had messages or letters, and would like to know who wants to see them before you produce them, I suppose Mr. Wolfe would tell you. He would have to."

"I have no messages or letters."

I was disappointed. "None at all? I said the past month or so, but before that would help. Any time."

He shook his head. "I never have had any. I doubt if she ever wrote a letter—that is, to anyone here—or any messages, except phone messages. She always did everything by telephone. And for the past month, longer than that, more than a year, she hasn't been—uh—she hasn't been around."

"I know." I was sympathetic, and I meant it, though not for him. "Anyway, I don't think Mr. Wolfe would be interested in letters about clothes. I think it's personal letters he wants, and he thought you might have known her well enough personally to have some."

"Well, I haven't. I can't say I didn't know her personally—she was a very fine customer here for two years, and she was a very personal person. But I never had a personal letter from her."

I had to resist temptation. I had him talking, and there was no telling if or when I would get at the others. But Wolfe had said not to labor it, and I disobey instructions only when I have reason to think I know more about it than he does, and at that moment I didn't even know why he had been consulting the phone book. So I didn't press. I thanked him and said I would appreciate it if he would tell me when Mr. Gallant would be available. He said he would find out, and left me, going to the rear and disappearing around the end of a screen, and soon I heard his voice, but too faint to get any words.

There was no other voice, so, being a detective, I figured it out that he was on a phone. That accomplished, I decided to detect whether the woman, who was seated at a table going through a portfolio, was either Anita Prince or Emmy Thorne. I voted no, arriving at it by a process so subtle and complicated that I won't go into it.

Drew reappeared, and I met him in the middle of the room. He said that Mr. Gallant was in his office with Miss Prince and could let me have five minutes. Another fish. Certainly Drew had told Gallant what my line was, and why did I rate even five seconds? As Drew led me to an elevator and entered with me, and pushed the button marked 2, I had to remember to look hopeful instead of smug.

The second-floor hall was narrow, with bare walls, and not carpeted. As I said, not a palace. After following Drew down six paces and through a door, I found myself in a pin-up paradise. All

available space on all four walls was covered with women, drawings and prints and photographs, both black-and-white and color, all sizes, and in one respect they were all alike: none of them had a stitch on. It hadn't occurred to me that a designer of women's clothes should understand female anatomy, but I admit it might help. The effect was so striking that it took me four or five seconds to focus on the man and woman seated at a table. By that time Drew had pronounced my name and gone.

Though the man and woman were fully clothed, they were striking too. He reminded me of someone, but I didn't remember who until later: Lord Byron—a picture of Lord Byron in a book in my father's library that had impressed me at an early age. It was chiefly Gallant's dark curly hair backing up a wide sweeping forehead, but the nose and chin were in it too. The necktie was all wrong; instead of Byron's choker he was sporting a narrow ribbon tied in a bow with long ends hanging.

The woman didn't go with him. She was small and trim, in a tailored suit that had been fitted by an expert, and her face was all eyes. Not that they popped, but they ran the show. In spite of Alec Gallant's lordly presence, as I approached the table I found myself aiming at Anita Prince's eyes.

Gallant was speaking. "What's this? About Sarah Yare?"

"Just a couple of questions." He had eyes too, when you looked at them. "It shouldn't take even five minutes. I suppose Mr. Drew told you?"

"He said Nero Wolfe is making an inquiry and sent you. What about? How she died?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. The fact is, Mr. Gallant, on this I'm just an errand boy. My instructions were to ask if you got any messages or letters from her in the past month or so, and if so will you let Mr. Wolfe see them."

"My God." He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and shook it—a lion pestered by a fly. He looked at the woman. "This is too much. Too much!" He looked at me. "You must know a woman was assassinated here yesterday. Of course you do!" He pointed at the door. "There!" His hand dropped to the desk like a dead bird. "And after that calamity, now this, the death of my old and valued friend. Miss Yare was not only my friend; in mold and frame she was perfection, in movement she was music, as a mannequin she would have been divine. My delight in her was completely pure. I never had a letter from her." His head jerked to Anita

Prince. "Send him away," he muttered.

She put fingers on his arm. "You gave him five minutes, Alec, and he has only had two." Her voice was smooth and sure. The eyes came to me. "So you don't know the purpose of Mr. Wolfe's inquiry?"

"No, Miss Prince, I don't. He only tells me what he thinks I need to know."

"Nor who hired him to make it?"

So Drew had covered the ground. "No. Not that either. He'll probably tell you, if you have what he wants, letters from her, and you want to know why he wants to see them."

"I have no letters from her. I never had any. I had no personal relations with Miss Yare." Her lips smiled, but the eyes didn't. "Though I saw her many times, my contact with her was never close. Mr. Gallant preferred to fit her himself. I just looked on. It seems—" She stopped for a word, and found it. "It seems odd that Nero Wolfe should be starting an inquiry immediately after her death. Or did he start it before?"

"I couldn't say. The first I knew, he gave me this errand this noon."

"You don't know much, do you?"

"No, I just take orders."

"Of course you do know that Miss Yare committed suicide?"

I didn't get an answer in. Gallant, hitting the table with a palm, suddenly shouted at her, "Name of God! Must you? Send him away!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gallant," I told him. "I guess my time's up. If you'll tell me where to find your sister and Miss Thorne, that will—"

I stopped because his hand had darted to an ashtray, a big metal one that looked heavy, and since he wasn't smoking he was presumably going to let fly with it. Anita Prince beat him to it. With her left hand she got his wrist, and with her right she got the ashtray and moved it out of reach. It was very quick and deft. Then she spoke, to me. "Miss Gallant is not here. Miss Thorne is busy, but you can ask Mr. Drew downstairs. You had better go."

I went. In more favorable circumstances I might have spared another five minutes for a survey of the pinups, but not then, not if I had to dodge ashtrays.

In the hall, having pulled the door shut, the indicated procedure, indicated both by the situation and by Miss Prince's sugges-

tion, was to take the elevator down and see Drew again, but a detective is supposed to have initiative. So when I heard a voice, female, floating out through an open door, I went on past the elevator to the door, for a look. Not only did I see, I was seen, and a voice, anything but female, came at me.

"You. Huh?"

I could have kicked myself. While, as I said, my mission couldn't be called secret with five people on the list, certainly Wolfe had intended it to be private, and there was Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide West, glaring at me.

"Sightseeing?" he asked. Purley's idea of humor is a little primitive. "The scene of the crime?"

I descended to his level. "Just morbid," I told him, crossing the sill. "Compulsion neurosis. Is this it?"

Evidently it was. The room was about the same size as Alec Gallant's, but while his had been dominated by women without clothes, this one ran to clothes without women. There were coats, suits, dresses, everything. They were on dummies, scattered around; on hangers, strung on a pole along a wall; and piled on a table. At my right one dummy, wearing a skirt, was bare from the waist up; she might have blushed if she had had a face to blush with.

There was one exception: a well-made tan wool dress standing by a corner of a desk contained a woman—a very attractive specimen in mold and frame, and in movement she could have been music. Standing beside her was Carl Drew. Seated at the desk was Sergeant Purley Stebbins, with a paper in his hand and other papers on the desk. Also on the desk, at his left, was a telephone—the one, presumably, that Wolfe and I had heard hit the floor.

What I had stumbled into was obvious. Purley was examining the effects, including papers, probably the second time over, of Bianca Voss, deceased, under surveillance on behalf of Alec Gallant, Incorporated.

"Actually," I said, advancing past the immodest dummy, "this is one homicide I have no finger in. I'm on a fishing trip," I moved my eyes. "Would you tell me, Mr. Drew, where I can find Miss Thorne?"

"Right here," the tan wool dress said. "I am Miss Thorne."

"I'm Archie Goodwin of Nero Wolfe's office. May I have a word with you?"

She exchanged glances with Carl Drew. Her glance told me that Drew had told her about me; and his, if I am half as bright as I ought to be, told me that if he was not on a more personal basis with her than he had been with Sarah Yare it wasn't his fault. If he wasn't he would like to be.

"Go ahead," Drew told her. "I'll stick around." She moved toward the door, and I was following when Purley pronounced my name, my last name. He has on occasion called me Archie, but not when I suddenly appeared, uninvited, when he was working on a homicide. I turned.

"Who are you fishing for?" he demanded.

"If I knew," I said, "I might tell you, but don't hold your breath." There was no point in trying to sugar him. The damage, if any, had been done the second he saw me. "See you in court."

Emmy Thorne led me down the hall to a door, the next one, and opened it. Walking, she could have been music at that, if her heels had had any purchase. She held the door for me to enter, shut it, went to a chair behind a desk, and sat. The room was less than half the size of the others and displayed neither women nor clothes.

"Sit down," she said. "What is this nonsense about letters for Sarah Yare?"

I took the chair at the end of her desk. "You know," I said, "my tie must be crooked or I've got a grease spot. Mr. Drew resented me, and Mr. Gallant was going to throw an ashtray at me. Now you. Why is it nonsense to ask a simple question politely and respectfully?"

"Maybe 'nonsense' isn't the word. Maybe I should have said 'gall.' What right have you to march in here and ask questions at all? Polite or not."

"None. It's not a right, it's a liberty. I have no right to ask you to have dinner with me this evening, which might not be a bad idea, but I'm at liberty to, and you're at liberty to tell me you'd rather dine at the automat with a baboon, only that wouldn't be very polite. Also when I ask if you have any letters from Sarah Yare you're at liberty to tell me to go climb a tree if you find the question ticklish. I might add that I would be at liberty to climb a pole instead of a tree. Have you any letters from Sarah Yare?"

She laughed. She had fine teeth. She stopped laughing abruptly. "Good Lord," she said, "I didn't think I would laugh for a year. This mess, what happened here yesterday, and then Sarah.

No, I have no letters from her. You don't have to climb a tree." The laughter was all gone, and her gray eyes, straight at me, were cool and keen. "What else?"

Again I had to resist temptation. With Drew the temptation had been purely professional; with her it was only partly professional and only partly pure. Cramer had said she was in charge of contacts, and one more might be good for her.

Having resisted, I shook my head. "Nothing else, unless you know of something. For instance, if you know of anyone who might have letters."

"I don't." She regarded me. "Of course I'm curious, if you want to call it that. I was very fond of Sarah, and this coming after all her trouble, naturally I'm wondering why you came here. You say Nero Wolfe is making an inquiry?"

"Yes, he sent me. I don't know who his client is, but my guess would be that it's some friend of Miss Yare's." I stood. "Someone else may be curious. Thank you, Miss Thorne. I'm glad I don't have to climb a tree."

She got up and offered a hand. "You might tell me who it is."

"I might if I knew." Her hand was cool and firm and I kept it for a second. "I'm sorry I interrupted you in there." That was absolutely true. "By the way, one more liberty: is Miss Gallant around?"

She said no and came with me to the hall and left me, heading for the scene of the crime. I went the other way, to the elevator. Down on the main floor the woman was there alone, at a table with a portfolio. Not at all like Macy's main floor. Emerging, I turned left, found a phone booth on Madison Avenue, dialed the number I knew best, got Fritz, and asked for Wolfe.

His voice came. "Yes, Archie?"

"It's full of fish. Swarming. Sarah Yare bought her clothes there for two years and they all loved her. I'm phoning to ask about Flora Gallant. I've seen all the others, but Flora isn't around. My guess is that she's in the D.A.'s office. Do I stick until she comes?"

"No. Satisfactory."

"Any further instructions?"

"No. Come home."

In the office, after a late lunch of corned-beef hash with mushrooms, chicken livers, white wine, and grated cheese, which Fritz apologized for because he had had to keep it warm too long,

I gave Wolfe a full report of the fishing trip, including all dialogue. When I had finished he nodded, he took in air through his nose all the way down, and let it out through his mouth.

"Very well," he said, "that settles it. You will now go—"

"Just a minute," I cut in. "It doesn't settle it for me. It was bad enough up there, not knowing the score, and before I do any more going I want a little light. Why did you pick on Sarah Yare, and where did the phone book come in?"

"I have an errand for you."

"Yeah. Will it keep for ten minutes?"

"I suppose so."

"Then why?"

He leaned back. "As I told you this morning, I thought I might have been hoodwinked and I intended to find out. It was quite possible that that performance here yesterday—getting us on the phone just in time to hear a murder committed—was flummery. Indeed, it was more than possible. Must I expound that?"

"No. Even Cramer suspected it."

"So he did. But his theory that Bianca Voss had been killed earlier and that another woman, not the murderer, was there beside the corpse waiting for a phone call was patently ridiculous. Must I expound that?"

"No, unless it was a lunatic. Anyone who would do that, even the murderer, with the chance that someone might come in any second, would be batty."

"Of course. But if she wasn't killed at the time we heard those sounds she must have been killed earlier, since you phoned almost immediately and sent someone to that room. Therefore the sounds didn't come from there. Miss Gallant did not dial that number. She dialed the number of some other person whom she had persuaded to perform that hocuspocus."

He turned a hand over. "I had come to that conclusion, or call it surmise, before I went to bed last night, and I had found it intolerable. I will not be mistaken for a jackass. Reading *The Times* at breakfast this morning, the item about the death of Sarah Yare, my attention was caught by the fact that she had been an actress. An actress can act a part. Also she had been in distress. Also she had died. If she had been persuaded to act *that* part, it would be extremely convenient—for the one who persuaded her—for her to die before she learned that a murder had been committed and she had been an accessory after the fact. Certainly that was mere

speculation, but it was not idle, and when I came down to the office I looked in the phone book to see if Sarah Yare was listed, found that she was, and dialed her number. Algonquin nine, one-eight-four-seven."

"What for? She was dead."

"I didn't lift the receiver. I merely dialed it, to hear it. Before doing so I strained my memory. I had to recall an experience that was filed somewhere in my brain, having reached it through my ears. As you know, I am trained to attend, to observe, and to register. So are you. That same experience is filed in your brain. Close your eyes and find it. Take your ears back to yesterday, when you were standing there, having surrendered your chair to Miss Gallant, and she was at the phone, dialing. Not the first number she dialed; you dialed that one yourself later. The second one, when, according to her, she was dialing the number of the direct line to Bianca Voss's office. Close your eyes and let your ears and brain take you back. Insist on it."

I did so. I got up and stood where I had stood while she was dialing, shut my eyes, and brought it back. In ten seconds I said, "Okay."

"Keep your eyes closed. I'm going to dial it. Compare."

The sound came of his dialing. I held my breath till the end, then opened my eyes and said positively, "No. Wrong. The first and third and fourth were wrong. The second might—"

"Close your eyes and try it again. This will be another number. Say when."

I shut my eyes and took five seconds. "Go."

The dialing sound came, the seven units. I opened my eyes. "That's more like it. That was it, anyway the first four. Beyond that I'm a little lost. But in that case—"

"Satisfactory. The first four were enough. The first number, which you rejected, as I did this morning, was Plaza two, nine-oh-two-two, the number of Bianca Voss's direct line according to the phone book—the number which Miss Gallant pretended to be dialing. The second was Sarah Yare's number, Algonquin nine, one-eight-four-seven."

"Well." I sat down. "I'll be damned."

"So it was still a plausible surmise, somewhat strengthened, but no more than that. If those people, especially Miss Gallant, could not be shown to have had some association with Sarah Yare, it was untenable. So I sent you to explore, and what you found pro-

moted the surmise to an assumption, and a weighty one. What time is it?"

He would have had to twist his neck a whole quarter turn to look at the wall clock, whereas I had only to lower my eyes to see my wrist. I obliged. "Five to four."

"Then instructions for your errand must be brief, and they can be. You will go to Sarah Yare's address on Thirteenth Street and look at her apartment. Her phone might have been discontinued since that book was issued. I need to know that the instrument is still there and operable before I proceed. If I intend to see that whoever tried to make a fool of me regrets it, I must take care not to make a fool of myself. Have I furnished the light you wanted?"

I told him it was at least a glimmer and departed on the errand. If you think I might have shown fuller appreciation of his dialing display, I beg to differ. There is no point in assuring a man that he is a genius when he already knows it. Besides, I was too busy being sore at me. I should have thought of it myself. I certainly should have caught on when I saw him with the phone book.

It was not my day. At the address of the late Sarah Yare on East Thirteenth Street I stubbed my toe again. One thing I think I'm good at is sizing up people, and I was dead wrong about the janitor of that old walkup. He looked as if anything would go, so I merely told him to let me into Sarah Yare's apartment to check the telephone, and the bum insisted on seeing my credentials. So I misjudged him again. I offered him a sawbuck and told him I only wanted two minutes for a look at the phone with him at my elbow, and when he turned me down I showed him a twenty. He just sneered at it. By that time we were bitter enemies, and if I had showed him a C he would probably have spit on it.

The upshot was that I went back home for an assortment of keys, returned, posted myself across the street, waited nearly an hour to be sure the enemy was not peeking, and broke and entered, technically.

I won't describe it; it was too painful. It was a hell of a dump for a Sarah Yare, even for a down-and-outer who had once been Sarah Yare. But the telephone was there, and it was working. I dialed to make sure, and got Fritz, and told him I just wanted to say hello and would be home in fifteen minutes, and he said that would please Mr. Wolfe because Inspector Cramer was there.

"No," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"When did he come?"

"Ten minutes ago. At six o'clock. Mr. Wolfe said to admit him and is with him in the office. Hurry home, Archie."

I did so.

I got a hackie who liked to take advantages, and it took a little less than the fifteen minutes. I ascended the stoop and let myself in, not banging the door, and tiptoed down the hall and stopped short of the office door, thinking to get a sniff of the atmosphere before entering. I got it. Wolfe's voice came.

"... and I didn't say I have never known you to be wrong, Mr. Cramer. I said I have never known you to be more wrong. That is putting it charitably, under provocation. You have accused me of duplicity. Pfu!"

"Nuts." Cramer had worked up to his grittiest rasp. "I have accused you of nothing. I have merely stated facts. The time of the murder was supposed to be established by you and Goodwin hearing it on the phone. Is that a fact? Those five people all have alibis for that time. One of them was here with you. Is that a fact? When I put it to you yesterday that the phone business might have been faked, that she might have been killed earlier, all I got was a runaround. You could challenge it circumstantially but not intrinsically, whatever the hell that means. Is that a fact? So that if you and Goodwin got to the witness stand you might both swear that you were absolutely satisfied that you had heard her get it at exactly half-past eleven. Is that a fact? Giving me to understand that you weren't interested, you weren't concerned, you had no—"

"No," Wolfe objected. "That was not broached."

"Nuts. You know damn well it was implied. You said you had never had any association with any of those people besides what was in your statement, so how could you be concerned, with Bianca Voss dead? Tell me this, did any of them approach you, directly or indirectly, between seven o'clock yesterday and noon today?"

"No."

"But—" He bore down on the "but." "*But* you sent Goodwin there today. He told Stebbins he was on a fishing trip. He talked with Drew, and Gallant, and Miss Prince, and he actually took Miss Thorne from under Stebbins' nose, took her out to talk with her. Is that a fact? And they all refused to tell what Goodwin said

to them or what they said to him. That *is* a fact. They say it was a private matter and had nothing to do with the murder of Bianca Voss. And when I come and ask you what you sent Goodwin there for, ask you plainly and politely, you say that you will—what are you laughing at?”

It wasn't a laugh, I just barely caught it—it was hardly even a chuckle; but all the same it could get under your skin. I knew.

“It escaped me, Mr. Cramer. Your choice of adverbs. Your conception of politeness. Pray continue.”

“All right, I asked you. And you said you will probably be ready to tell me within twenty-four hours. And what I said was absolutely justified. I did not accuse you of duplicity. You know what I said.”

“I do indeed, Mr. Cramer.” I couldn't see Wolfe, but I knew he had upturned a palm. “This is childish and futile. If a connection is established between your murder investigation and the topic of Mr. Goodwin's talks with those people today, it will be only because I formed a conjecture and acted on it. I hope to establish it within twenty-four hours, and meanwhile it will do no harm to give you a hint. Have you any information on the death of a woman named Sarah Yare?”

“Some, yes. Presumed a suicide, but being checked. I have two men on it. What about it?”

“I suggest that you assign more men to it, good ones, and explore it thoroughly. I think we will both find it helpful. I may soon have a more concrete suggestion, but for the present that should serve. You know quite well—”

The doorbell rang. I aboutfaced and looked through the one-way glass panel of the front door. It wasn't a visitor on the stoop, it was a mob. All five of them were there: Gallant, his sister, Anita Prince, Emmy Thorne, and Carl Drew. Fritz appeared from the kitchen, saw me, and stopped. I got my notebook and pen from pockets and wrote:

That phone works. The five subjects are outside wanting in.

AG

I told Fritz to stand by, tore out the sheet, entered the office and crossed to Wolfe's desk, and handed it to him.

Wolfe read it, frowned at it for three seconds, turned his head and called “Fritz!”

Fritz appeared at the door. "Yes, sir?"

"Put the chain-bolt on and tell those people they will be admitted shortly. Stay there."

"Yes, sir." Fritz went.

Wolfe looked at Cramer. "Mr. Gallant, his sister, Miss Prince, Miss Thorne, and Mr. Drew have arrived, uninvited and unexpected. You'll have to leave without being seen. In the front room until they have entered. I'll communicate with you later."

"Like hell I'll leave." Cramer was on his feet. "Like hell they're unexpected." He was moving toward the hall, his intention plain—taking over as receptionist.

"Mr. Cramer!" It snapped at his back, turning him. "Would I lie so clumsily? If they had been expected would I have let you in? Would I have sat here bickering with you? Either you leave or I do. If you admit them you'll have them to yourself, and I wish you luck."

Cramer was glaring. "You think I'm going to sneak out and sit on your damn stoop until you whistle?"

"That *would* be unseemly," Wolfe conceded. "Very well." He pointed at a picture on the wall to his left behind him—a pretty waterfall. "You know about that. You may take that station, but only if you engage not to disclose yourself unless you are invited. Unequivocally."

The waterfall covered a hole in the wall. On the other side, in a wing of the hall across from the kitchen, the hole was covered by nothing, and you could not only see through but also hear through. Cramer had used it once before, a couple of years ago.

Cramer stood, considering. Wolfe demanded, "Well? They're waiting. For you or for me?"

Cramer said, "Okay, we'll try it your way," turned and marched to the hall, and turned left.

Wolfe told me, "All right, Archie. Bring them in."

Lord Byron, alias Alec Gallant, and the red leather chair went together fine. He sat well back, unlike most people I have seen there. Usually they are either too mad or too upset. Any of the other four probably would have been; they looked it. They were on yellow chairs that I had moved up to make a row facing Wolfe, and Emmy Thorne nearest me, then Anita Prince, then Carl Drew, then Flora Gallant. That put Flora nearest her brother, which seemed appropriate.

Wolfe was turned to Gallant. "You ask me, sir, why I sent Mr. Goodwin to ask you people about Sarah Yare. Of course I'm under no compulsion to reply, and I'm not sure that I am prepared to. Instead, I may ask why his questions, certainly not provocative, so disturbed you. Apparently they have even impelled you to call on me in a body. Why?"

"Talk," Gallant said. "*Vent. Wind.*" There was an ashtray on the little table at his elbow, but not a heavy one.

Anita Prince put in, "The police have insisted on knowing why he was there, what he wanted."

Wolfe nodded. "And you refused to say. Why?"

"Because," Emmy Thorne declared, "it was none of their business. And we have a right to know why you sent him, whether his questions were provocative or not." That girl was strong on rights.

Wolfe's eyes went from right to left and back again. "There's no point," he said, "in dragging this out. I'll grant your question priority and we'll go on from there. I sent Mr. Goodwin to see you because I suspected I had been gulled and wanted to find out; and further, because I had guessed that there was a connection between Sarah Yare, and her death, and the murder of Bianca Voss. By coming here en masse you have made that guess a conviction, if any doubt had remained."

"I knew it," Flora Gallant mumbled.

"*Tais-toi*," her brother commanded her. To Wolfe: "I'll tell you why we came here. We came for an explanation. We came—"

"For an understanding," Carl Drew cut in. "We're in trouble, all of us, you know that, and we need your help, and we're ready to pay for it. First we have to know what the connection is between Sarah Yare and what happened to Bianca Voss."

Wolfe shook his head. "You don't mean that. You mean you have to know whether I have established the connection, and if so, how. I'm willing to tell you, but before I do so I must clarify matters. There must be no misunderstanding. For instance, I understand that all of you thought yourselves gravely endangered by Miss Voss's presence. You, Miss Prince, you, Miss Thorne, and you, Mr. Drew—your dearest ambitions were threatened. Your future was committed to the success and glory of that enterprise, and you were convinced that Miss Voss was going to cheapen it, and perhaps destroy it. Do you challenge that?"

"Of course not." Emmy Thorne was scornful. "Everybody knew it."

"Then that's understood. That applies equally to you, Miss Gallant, but with special emphasis. You also had a more intimate concern, for your brother. You told me so. As for you, Mr. Gallant, you are not a man to truckle, yet you let that woman prevail. Presumably you were under severe constraint. Were you?"

Gallant opened his mouth and closed it. He looked at his sister, returned to Wolfe, and again opened his mouth and closed it. He was under constraint now, no doubt about that.

He forced it out. "I was under her heel." He clamped his jaw. He unclamped it. "The police know. They found out enough, and I have told them the rest. She was a bad woman. I met her in France, during the war. We were in the Resistance together when I married her. Only afterward I learned that she was *perfidie*. She had been a traitor to France—I couldn't prove it, but I knew it. I left her and changed my name and came to America—and then last year she found me and made demands. I was under her heel."

Wolfe grunted. "That won't do, Mr. Gallant. I doubt if it has satisfied the police, and it certainly doesn't satisfy me. In that situation you might have killed her, but surely you wouldn't have let her take charge of your business and your life. What else was there?"

"Nothing. Nothing!"

"Pfui. Of course there was. And if the investigation is prolonged the police will discover it. I advise you to disclose it and let me get on and settle this affair. Didn't her death remove her heel?"

"Yes. Thank God it did." Gallant hit the arms of the chair with his palms. "With her gone there is no evidence to fear. She had two brothers, and they, like her, were traitors, and I killed them. I would have killed her too, but she escaped me. During the war it would have been merely an episode, but it was later, much later, when I found out about them, and by then it was a crime. With her evidence I was an *assassin*, and I was doomed. Now she is gone, thank God, but I did not kill her. You know I did not. At half-past eleven yesterday morning I was in my workshop with Miss Prince and others, and you can swear that she was killed at that moment. That is why we came to see you, to arrange to pay—"

"Hold it, Alec." Anita Prince headed him off. "Mr. Wolfe wants to clarify matters. Let him."

"The cat's head is out," Wolfe told her, "but I had already heard it scratch. Let's get on. I cannot swear that Bianca Voss was kill-

ed 'at that moment.' On the contrary, I'm sure she wasn't, for a variety of reasons. There are such minor ones as the extraordinary billingsgate she spat at me on the phone, quite gratuitous; and her calling me a gob of fat. A woman who still spoke the language with so marked an accent would not have the word 'gob' so ready, and probably wouldn't have it at all."

He waved "gob" away. "But the major reasons are more cogent. In the first place, it was too pat. Since the complexities of nature permit a myriad of coincidences we cannot reject one offhand, but we can discriminate. That one—that the attack had come just at the moment when Miss Gallant had got Mr. Goodwin and me on the phone with her—was highly suspect. Besides, it was indiscreet to strike just then. Why not wait until she had hung up? Whoever was talking with her would certainly hear the sounds and take alarm. As I told Mr. Cramer, it was open to challenge circumstantially, though not intrinsically. However, there was another challenge, on surer ground. Miss Gallant did not dial Plaza two, nine-oh-two-two, Miss Voss's number. She dialed Algonquin nine, one-eight-four-seven, Sarah Yare's number."

A noise, a sort of low growl, came from the waterfall. I was farthest away, and I heard it distinctly, so it must have reached their ears too, but Wolfe's last words had so riveted their attention that it didn't register.

It did with Wolfe, and he added hastily, "I didn't know that yesterday. I became certain of it only after you rang my doorbell, when Mr. Goodwin handed me this note." He tapped it, there on his desk. "Its first words are 'That phone works.' I had sent him to learn if Sarah Yare's phone was in operation. Obviously, Miss Gallant had arranged with Miss Yare to impersonate Bianca Voss, and it is reasonable—"

"Wait a minute." Gallant had come forward in the red leather chair. "You can't prove that."

"Directly, no. Inferentially, yes."

"And how do you know she dialed Sarah Yare's number? You weren't where you could see the dial, and neither was Goodwin."

Wolfe nodded. "Evidently you have discussed it with her. You're quite right, Mr. Gallant; we couldn't see the dial. Nevertheless, we can supply evidence, and we think it will be persuasive. I am not—"

"What kind of evidence?"

"That's no good, Alec." It was Emmy Thorne, the contact girl.

"You can't push Nero Wolfe. He has his teeth in it, you can see that. You know what we decided."

"I'm not sure," Anita Prince objected, "that we decided right."

"I am. Carl?"

"Yes." Drew was chewing his lip. "I think so. Yes."

"Flora? It's up to you."

"I guess so." Flora's voice was cracked, and she tried again. "I guess so." A little better.

Emmy nodded. "Go ahead, Alec. You can't push him."

"My God." Gallant looked at his sister, and back at Wolfe. "All right. We will pay you to help us. *I* will pay you. My sister is innocent and she must not suffer. It would be an offense against nature, against God Himself. She has told me all about it, and she was stupid, but she is innocent. She did arrange with Sarah Yare, as you said, but only to move you. She had read much about you and had a great opinion of your abilities. She was desperate about Bianca Voss. She knew you demanded high fees, much beyond her resources, so she conceived a plan. She would persuade you to talk with Bianca Voss on the phone, and she would get Sarah instead, and Sarah would abuse you with such violence that you would be offended and resent it, and you would be moved to act against Bianca Voss. It was stupid, yes, very stupid, but it was not criminal."

Wolfe's eyes, at him, were half closed. "And you want to pay me to help your sister?"

"Yes. When I told her you had sent your man to inquire about Sarah Yare I saw she was frightened and asked her why, and she told me. I consulted the others, and it was apparent that you knew something, and that was dangerous. We decided to come and ask you to help. My sister must not suffer."

Wolfe's eyes moved. "Miss Gallant. You heard your brother. Did he quote you correctly?"

"Yes!" That time it was too loud.

"You did those things? As he related them?"

"Yes!"

Wolfe returned to Gallant. "I agree with you, sir, that your sister was stupid, but you are not the one to proclaim it. You say that she arranged with Sarah Yare to abuse me on the phone, but Miss Yare didn't stop at that. She ended by making noises indicating that she had been violently attacked, and jerked the phone off onto the floor, and made other noises, and then hung up the

phone and cut the connection. Was that on her own initiative? Her own idea? Your sister's stupidity can bow to yours if you expected me to overlook that point—or worse, if you missed it yourself."

"I am not stupid, Mr. Wolfe."

"Then you are devious beyond my experience."

"Devious?"

"*Rusé. Subtil.*"

"No. I am not." Gallant clamped his jaw. He released it. "*Bien*. Suppose, only to suppose, she arranged that too, that comedy. Suppose even that she killed Bianca Voss. Was that a crime? No; it was justice; it was the hand of God. Bianca Voss was an evil woman. She was *vilaine*. Are you so virtuous that you must crucify my sister? Are you a paragon? For she is in your hands, at your mercy. You know about Sarah Yare, but the police do not. You know she dialed that number, but the police do not, and they will not unless you tell them. By your word it can be that my sister was here with you at the time that Bianca Voss was killed. As I have said, I will pay you. It will be a great service from you, and it deserves payment. I will trust you. I will pay you now."

Wolfe grunted. "That was quite a speech."

"It was not a speech. I do not make speeches. It was an appeal to your charity. From my heart."

"And to my cupidity." Wolfe shook his head. "No. I am not a paragon. I am not even a steward of the law. But you have ignored two important factors: one, my self-esteem. Even if Bianca Voss deserved to die, I will not permit a murderer to take me for a simpleton. Two, another woman died too. Was Sarah Yare also evil? Was she *vilaine*?"

"But she—Sarah killed herself!"

"No. I don't believe it. That's another coincidence I reject. Granted that she may have been wretched enough for that extreme, why did she choose that particular moment? Again too pat. According to the published account she died between ten o'clock yesterday morning and two in the afternoon, but I can narrow it a little. Since she spoke with me on the phone at eleven thirty, she died between that hour and two o'clock. I believe that the person who killed Bianca Voss at some time prior to eleven thirty, and arranged with Sarah Yare to enact that comedy, as you call it, went to Sarah Yare's apartment later and killed her. Indeed, prudence demanded it. If only Bianca Voss had died—"

"No!" Gallant exploded. "Impossible! Totally impossible! My sister loved Sarah! She killed her? Insane!"

"But you believe she killed Bianca Voss. You came here believing that. That was stupid too. She didn't."

Gallant gawked at him. Lord Byron shouldn't gawk, but he did. So did the others. Also they made noises. Carl Drew demanded, "Didn't? You say she *didn't*?" Emmy Thorne asked coolly, "What's this, Mr. Wolfe? A game?"

"No, madam, not a game. Nor a comedy—Mr. Gallant's word. As a man I know said yesterday, murder is no joke." Wolfe's eyes went to Flora. "There was much against you, Miss Gallant, especially the fact that you dialed that other number before you dialed Sarah Yare's and asked someone you called Doris if Miss Voss was around. Are you too rattled to remember that?"

"No." She was clutching the rim of her bag with both hands. "I remember."

"Of course the reason for it was obvious, if you had killed Bianca Voss before you came here; you had to know that the body had not been found before you proceeded with your strategem. Since you had *not* killed Bianca Voss, why did you make that call?"

"I wanted to make sure that she hadn't gone out. That she was there in her office. You might call her again after I left and find out she hadn't been there. I didn't care if you called her and she denied she had talked to you like that. I thought you would think she was lying. I suppose that was stupid." Her mouth worked. "How did you know I didn't kill her?"

"You told me. You showed me. If you had devised that elaborate humbug, certainly you would have decided how to act at the moment of crisis. You would have decided to be alarmed, and shocked, and even perhaps a little dazed. But it wasn't like that. You were utterly stunned with bewilderment. When Mr. Goodwin told us what Mr. Drew had said, what did you say? You said, 'But how—' And repeated it, 'But how—' If you had killed Bianca Voss you would have had to be a master dramatist to write such a line, and an actress of genius to deliver it as you did; and you are neither."

Wolfe waved it away. "But that was for me. For others, for a judge and jury, I must do better, and I think I can. If you are innocent, someone else is guilty. Someone else learned of the arrangement you had made with Sarah Yare, either from you or

from her, and persuaded her to add a dramatic climax. Someone else killed Bianca Voss and then established an invulnerable alibi for the crucial period. Someone else had secured the required amount of cyanide—it doesn't take much. Someone else, having established the alibi, went to Sarah Yare's apartment and poisoned her glass of whiskey. That was done before two o'clock, and that should make it simple. Indeed, it *has* made it simple.

"Shortly before you came I learned from Mr. Cramer of the police that you arrived at your brother's place yesterday a few minutes after noon. Since you left here at a quarter of twelve, you hadn't had time to go first to Thirteenth Street and dispose of Sarah Yare; and you were continuously under the eyes of policemen the rest of the afternoon. That is correct?"

"Yes." Flora's eyes were wet but she hadn't used a handkerchief. "I wanted to go and see what had happened to Sarah, but I was afraid—I didn't know—"

"It's a good thing you didn't, madam. I also learned from Mr. Cramer that you, Mr. Gallant, you, Mr. Drew, and you, Miss Prince, were also constantly under surveillance, for hours, from the time the police arrived. That leaves you, Miss Thorne." His eyes were narrowed at her. "You were with three men in an office on Forty-sixth Street from eleven twenty until a quarter to twelve. You arrived at Mr. Gallant's place, and found the police there, shortly before three o'clock. You may be able to account for the interim satisfactorily. Do you want to try?"

"I don't have to try." Emmy Thorne's gray eyes were not as cool and keen as they had been when she had told me I didn't have to climb a tree. She had to blink to keep them at Wolfe. "So it is a game."

"Not one you'll enjoy, I fear. Nor will I; I'm out of it now. To disclose your acquisition of the cyanide you needed for Sarah Yare; to show that you entered Bianca Voss's room yesterday morning, or could have, before you left for your business appointment; to find evidence of your visit to Thirteenth Street after your business appointment; to decide which homicide you will be put on trial for—all that is for others. You must see now that it was a mistake—Archie!"

I was up and moving, but halted. Gallant, out of his chair and advancing, wasn't going to touch her. His fists were doubled, but not to swing; they were pressed against his chest. He stopped in front of her and commanded, "Look at me, Emmy."

To do so she would have had to move her head, tilt it back, and she moved nothing.

"I have loved you," he said. "Did you kill Sarah?"

Her lips moved but no sound came.

His fists opened for his fingers to spread on his chest. "So you heard us that day, and you knew I couldn't marry you because I was married to her, and you killed her. That I can understand, for I loved you. But that you killed Sarah, no. No! And even that is not the worst! Today, when I told you and the others what Flora had told me, you accepted it, you allowed us to accept it, that Flora had killed Bianca. You would have let her suffer for it. Look at me! You would have let my sister—"

Flora was there, tugging at his sleeve, sputtering. "You love her, Alec, don't hurt her now."

Gallant jerked loose, backed up, folded his arms, and breathed; and Emmy Thorne moved. She came up out of her chair, stood rigid long enough to give Gallant a straight hard look, shook her head, spun away from him, and headed for the door, brushing against Flora. Her route took her past Anita Prince, who tilted her head back to look up at her, and past Carl Drew, who had to pull his feet back not to trip her.

I didn't budge, thinking I wasn't needed, and I was right. In movement she might have been music, but if so, the music stopped. As she made the hall and turned toward the front a hand gripped her arm—a hand that had had plenty of practice gripping arms.

"Take it easy, Miss Thorne," Cramer said. "We'll have to have a talk."

"*Grand Dieu*," Gallant groaned, and covered his face with his hand.

"Q"

Isaac Asimov

The Phony Ph.D.

As predicted and promised, the Black Widowers have become a series. To refresh your memory, the first tale of the Black Widowers, "The Acquisitive Chuckle," appeared in our January 1972 issue and introduced the five members of the club: organic chemist James Drake, code expert Thomas Trumbull, writer Emmanuel Rubin, patent attorney Geoffrey Avalon, and artist Mario Gonzalo. (And let's not forget Henry the waiter.) At each monthly meeting the host brings a guest for grilling. In this second story the subject scheduled for cross-examination is Dr. Arnold Stacey, Ph.D. But in this session something different happens. Dr. James Drake, Ph.D., has an academic mystery to put before his colleagues and the guest . . .

Detectives: THE BLACK WIDOWERS and HENRY

The meeting of the Black Widowers was marred, but only slightly, by the restlessness of James Drake.

It was a shame this had to be so for the dinner was unusually good, even allowing for the loving care with which the "Milano" served its special group every month. And if the veal *cordon bleu* needed anything to add the final bit of luster, it was Henry's meticulous service, which had a plate on the table where no plate had been before, yet without any person present able to catch sight of it en route.

It was Thomas Trumbull's turn to be host, something he did with a savagery to which no one paid the slightest attention—a savagery made particularly bitter by the fact that as host he did not think it fit to come charging in just one second before the pre-prandial drinks had completed their twice-around (three times for Rubin, who showed no effects). Trumbull had exercised the host's privilege and brought a guest for the grilling. The guest was tall, almost as tall as Geoffrey Avalon, the Black Widowers' patent-at-

torney member. He was lean, almost as lean as Geoffrey Avalon. He was clean-shaven, though, and lacked Avalon's solemnity. Indeed, his face was round and his cheeks were plump, in a manner so out of keeping with the rest of his body that one might have thought him the product of a head transplant. His name was Arnold Stacey.

"Arnold Stacey, Ph.D." Trumbull had introduced him.

"Ah," said Avalon, with the air of portentousness he automatically gave to his most trivial statement. "Doctor Doctor Stacey."

"Doctor Doctor?" murmured the guest, his lips parting as though getting ready for a smile at the pleasantry sure to follow.

"It is a rule of the Black Widowers," said Trumbull impatiently, "that all members are doctors by virtue of membership. A doctor for any other reason is—"

"—a Doctor Doctor," finished Stacey. And he smiled.

"You can count honorary doctorates, too," said Rubin, his wide-spaced teeth gleaming over a beard as straggly as Avalon's was crisp. "But then I would have to be called Doctor Doctor Doctor—"

Mario Gonzalo was mounting the stairs just then, bringing with him a faint whiff of turpentine as though he had come straight from his artist's studio. (Trumbull maintained you couldn't draw that conclusion, that Gonzalo placed a drop of turpentine behind each ear before every social engagement.)

Gonzalo was in time to catch Emmanuel Rubin's statement and said, before he had quite reached the top step, "What honorary doctorates did you ever receive, Manny? Dishonorary doctorates, more likely."

Rubin's face froze, as it usually did when he was attacked without warning; but that was merely the short pause necessary for him to gather his forces. He said, "I can list them for you. In 1938, when I was only fifteen, it so happens I was a revivalist preacher and I received a D.D. from—"

"No, for God's sake," said Trumbull, "don't give us the list."

"You're fighting out of your weight, Mario," said Avalon with wooden amiability. "You know Rubin can never be caught in an inconsistency once he starts talking about his early life."

"Sure," said Gonzalo, "that's why his stories are so dull. They're all autobiographical. No poetry."

"I have written poetry—" began Rubin, and then Drake appeared. Usually he was the first person there; this time he was the last.

"Train late," he said quietly, shucking his coat. Since he had to come from New Jersey to attend, the only surprise was that it didn't happen oftener.

"Introduce me to the guest," Drake added, as he turned to take the drink that Henry the waiter held out for him.

Avalon said, "Doctor Doctor Arnold Stacey—Doctor Doctor James Drake."

"Greetings," said Drake, holding up his glass in salute. "What's the nature of the lesser doctorate, Doctor Stacey?"

"Ph.D. in chemistry, Doctor Doctor, and call me Arnold."

Drake's small grizzled mustache seemed to bristle. "Ditto," he said. "My Ph.D. is also in chemistry."

They looked at each other warily for a moment. Then Drake said, "Industry? Government? Academic?"

"I teach. Assistant Professor at Berry University," Stacey replied.

"Where?"

"Berry University. It's not a large school. It's in—"

"I know where it is," said Drake. "I did graduate work there—considerably before your time, though. Did you get your degree at Berry before you joined the faculty?"

"No, I—"

"Let's sit down, for God's sake," roared Trumbull. "There's more drinking and less eating going on here all the time." He was standing at the host's seat with his glass raised, glowering at the others as each took his seat. "Sit down, sit down!" And then he intoned the ritual toast to Old King Cole in a singsong baritone while Gonzalo blandly kept time with a hard roll which he broke and buttered when the last syllable was finished.

"What's this?" said Rubin suddenly, staring down at his dish in dismay.

"Pâté de la maison, sir," said Henry softly.

"That's what I thought. Chopped liver. Damn it, Henry, I ask you, as a pathologically honest man, is this fit to eat?"

"The matter is quite subjective, sir. It depends on the personal taste of the diner."

Avalon pounded the table. "Point of order! I object to Manny's use of the adjectival phrase 'pathologically honest.' Violation of confidence!"

Rubin colored slightly. "Hold on, Jeff. I don't violate any confidence. That happens to be my opinion of Henry quite indepen-

dently of what happened here last month."

"Ruling from the chair," said Avalon stubbornly.

Trumbull said, "Shut up, both of you. It is the ruling of the chair that Henry may be recognized by all Black Widowers as that rare phenomenon, a completely honest man. No reason need be given. It can be taken as a matter of common knowledge."

Henry smiled gently, "Shall I take away the pâté, sir?"

"Would you eat it, Henry?" asked Rubin.

"With pleasure, sir."

"Then I'll eat it, too." And he did so, with every sign of barely controlled distaste.

Trumbull leaned over to Drake and said in a low voice, "What the hell's bothering you?"

Drake started slightly and said, "Nothing. What's bothering you?"

"You are," said Trumbull. "I've never seen a roll taken apart into so many pieces in my life."

The conversation grew general after that, centering chiefly on Rubin's aggrieved contention that honesty lacked survival value and that all the forces of natural selection combined to eliminate honesty as a human trait. He was defending his thesis well until Gonzalo asked him if he attributed his own success as a writer ("such as it is," said Gonzalo) to plagiarism. When Rubin met the point head-on and tried to prove, by close reasoning, that plagiarism was fundamentally different from all other forms of dishonesty and therefore might be treated independently, he was hooted down.

Then, between the main course and dessert, Drake left for the Men's Room and Trumbull followed him.

Trumbull said, "Do you know this Stacey, Jim?"

Drake shook his head. "No. Not at all."

"Well, what's wrong, then? I admit you're not an animated phonograph needle like Rubin but damn it, you haven't said a word all dinner! And you keep watching Stacey."

Drake said, "Do me a favor, Tom. Let me question him after dinner."

Trumbull shrugged. "Sure."

Over the coffee Trumbull said, "The time has come for the grilling of the guest. Under ordinary circumstances I, as the possessor of the only logical mind at the table, would begin. On this occasion, however, I pass in favor of Doctor Doctor Drake since he is

of the same professional persuasion as our honored guest."

"Doctor Doctor Stacey," began Drake abruptly, "how do you justify your existence?"

"Less and less as time goes on," said Stacey, unperturbed.

"What the hell does that mean?" broke in Trumbull.

"I'm asking the questions," said Drake with unaccustomed firmness.

"I don't mind answering," said Stacey. "Since the universities seem to be in deeper trouble each year, and as I do nothing about it, my own function as a university appendage seems continually less defensible."

Drake ignored that. He said, "You teach at the school where I earned my master's degree. Have you ever heard of me?"

Stacey hesitated. "I'm sorry, Jim. There are a lot of chemists I haven't heard of. No offense intended."

"I'm not sensitive. I never heard of you, either. What I mean is: have you ever heard of me at Berry U.? As a student there?"

"No, I haven't."

"I'm not surprised. But there was another student at Berry when I was there who stayed on for his doctorate. His name was Faron—F-A-R-O-N. Lance Faron. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Lance Faron?" Stacey frowned.

"Lance may have been short for Lancelot—Lancelot Faron. But we always called him Lance."

Stacey shook his head. "No, the name isn't familiar."

Drake said, "But you have heard of David St. George?"

"Professor St. George? Certainly. He died the same year I joined the faculty. I can't say I knew him, but I've certainly heard of him."

Trumbull said, "Hell and damnation, Jim. What kind of questions are these? Is this old-grad week?"

Drake, who had drifted off into thought, scrambled out of it. "Wait, Tom. I'm getting at something, and I don't want to ask further questions. I want to tell a story first. My God, this has been bothering me for years and I never thought of putting it up to all of you till now—now that our guest—"

"I vote for the story," interrupted Gonzalo.

"On condition," said Avalon, "it not be construed as setting a precedent."

"Chair decides precedents," growled Trumbull. "Go ahead, Drake. Only for God's sake don't take all night."

"It's simple enough," said Drake, "and it's about Lance Faron, which is his real name; and since I'm going to slander him, you'll have to understand, Arnold, that everything said within these walls is strictly confidential."

"That's been explained to me," said Stacey.

"Go on," shouted Trumbull. "You *will* take all night."

Drake said, "The thing about Lance is that I don't think he ever intended to be a chemist. His family was rich—well, I'll tell you. When he was doing graduate work he had his lab outfitted with a cork floor at his own expense."

"Why a cork floor?" Gonzalo demanded.

"If you'd ever dropped a breaker on a tile floor you wouldn't have to ask," said Drake. "Lance majored in chemistry as an undergraduate because he had to major in something. Then he went on to do graduate work in the same field because World War II was on in Europe, the draft was beginning—it was 1940—and graduate work in chemistry would look good to the draft board. And it did; he never got into the army as far as I know. But that was perfectly legitimate; I never got into uniform, either, so I point no fingers."

Avalon, who had been a naval officer, looked austere but agreed. "Perfectly legitimate."

Drake said, "He wasn't serious about it—about chemistry, I mean. He had no natural aptitude for it and he never really worked at it and his grades weren't high enough to qualify him for research toward a doctorate.

"That was the whole point. We all—the rest of us who were in graduate chemistry that year—assumed he would only go as far as his master's. Then he'd get some sort of job that would keep his draft exemption going; we figured his father would help out there—"

"Were the rest of you jealous of him?" asked Rubin.

"We weren't jealous of *him*," said Drake. "Sure, we envied his situation. Hell, those were the days before government grants fell about us like snowflakes. Every college semester I lived a suspense story called Can-I-Dig-Up-the-Tuition-or-Do-I-Have-to-Drop-Out? All of us would have liked to be rich, or have a rich father. But Lance was a likable guy. He didn't parade his advantages and would even lend us a few bucks when we were in a hole and he'd do it unostentatiously. And he was perfectly willing to concede he was no brain.

"In return we were willing to help him. Gus Blue tutored him in physical organic—for a fee. And I must admit Lance wasn't always scrupulous. There was one preparation he was supposed to have synthesized in lab and we all knew he bought a sample at a chemical supply house and turned it in as his own. At least, we were pretty sure he did, but it didn't bother us."

Rubin said, "Why not? That was dishonest, wasn't it?"

"Because it didn't do him any good," said Drake, in annoyance. "It just meant another C. But the reason I bring it up is that we all knew he was not only capable of cheating but actually did cheat."

"You mean the rest of you wouldn't have?" interposed Stacey. There was a touch of cynicism in his voice.

Drake lifted his eyebrows. "I wouldn't guarantee any of us if we had really been pushed. The point is, we weren't. We all had a fighting chance to get through without the risk of cheating, so none of us did. Certainly, I didn't."

"But then there came a time when Lance made up his mind to go on for his Ph.D. It was at a smoker. The war jobs were just beginning to open up and there were a few recruiters on campus. It meant complete security from the draft, but getting our Ph.D.'s meant a lot to us and there was always some question as to whether we'd come back to school once we got away from class.

"Someone—not I—said he wished he were in Lance's shoes. Lance had no choice to make. We were sure he would take a job.

"I don't know," Lance said, maybe just to be contrary. "I think I'll stay right here and go on for the Ph.D."

"He may have been joking. Anyway, we all thought he was, and we laughed. But we were all a little high at the smoker and it became one of those laughs without reason, you know? If one of us started to die down, he would catch someone else's eyes and start off again. Really it wasn't that funny. In fact, it wasn't funny at all. But we laughed till we were half suffocated. And Lance turned red, and then white.

"I remember I tried to say, 'Lance, we're not laughing at you.' But I just couldn't. I was choking and sputtering. So Lance walked out on us.

"After that he did go on for his Ph.D. He wouldn't talk about it but he signed all the necessary forms and that seemed to satisfy him. After a while the situation became as before. He was friendly again.

"I said to him, 'Listen, Lance, you'll be disappointed. You can't get faculty approval for doctoral research with a straight-C record. You just can't.'

"He said, 'Why not? I've talked to the committee. I told them I'd take chemical kinetics under Professor St. George, and that I'd do better than C in that. I said I'd show them what I could do.'

"That made less than no sense to me. That was much funnier than the remark we had all laughed at. You'd have to know St. George. You ought to know what I mean, Arnold."

Stacey nodded. "He gave a stiff course in kinetics. One or two of the brightest would make a B; otherwise, all C's and F's."

Drake nodded. "There are some professors who take pride in that sort of thing. It's a kind of professorial version of Captain Bligh. But St. George was a good chemist, probably the best Berry ever had. He was the only member of the faculty to achieve national prominence after the war. If Lance could take his course and get a high mark, that was bound to be impressive. Even with C's in everything else, the argument would be: 'Well, he hasn't worked much because he hasn't had to, but when he finally decided to buckle down he showed fire-cracking ability.'

"He and I took chemical kinetics together and I was running and sweating every day of that course. But Lance sat in the seat next to me and never stopped smiling. He took notes casually, and sometimes he even studied them.

"Well, it went down to the wire like that. St. George didn't give quizzes. He let everything hang on the discussion periods and on the final examination, which lasted three hours—a *full* three hours.

"In the final week of the course there were no lectures and the students had their last chance to pull themselves together before exams week. Lance was still smiling. His work in the other courses had been usual Lance-quality, but that didn't seem to bother him. We would say, 'How are you doing in kinetics, Lance?' and he would say, 'No sweat,' and sound *cheerful*, damn it.

"Then came the day of the final exam—" Drake paused, and his lips tightened.

"Well?" said Trumbull.

Drake said, his voice a little lower, "Lance Faron passed. He did more than pass. He got a 96. No one had *ever* gotten over 90 in one of St. George's finals and I doubt anyone ever has since."

"I never heard of anyone getting in the 90's in recent times," said Stacey.

"What did you get?" asked Gonzalo.

"I got 82," said Drake. "And except for Lance's mark it was the best in the class."

"What happened to the fellow?" asked Avalon.

"He went on for his Ph.D., of course. The faculty qualified him without hesitation and the story was that St. George himself went to bat for him.

"I left after that," Drake continued. "I worked on isotope separation during the war and eventually shifted to Wisconsin for my doctoral research. But I would hear about Lance sometimes from old friends. The last I heard he was in Maryland somewhere, running a private lab of his own. About ten years ago I remember looking up his name in Chemical Abstracts and finding the record of a few papers he had turned out. Run-of-the-mill stuff. Typical Lance."

"He's still independently wealthy?" asked Trumbull.

"I suppose so."

Trumbull leaned back. "If that's your story, Jim, then what the hell is biting you?"

Drake looked about the table, first at one and then at another. Then he brought his fist down so that the coffee cups jumped and clattered. "Because he *cheated*, damn his hide! And as long as he got his Ph.D. by fraud, mine is cheapened by that much—and yours, too," he said to Stacey.

Stacey murmured, "Phony doctor."

"What?" said Drake.

"Nothing," said Stacey; "I was just thinking of a colleague of mine who did a stint at a medical school where the students regarded the M.D. as the only legitimate doctor's degree in the universe. To them a Ph.D. stood for 'phony doctor.'"

Drake snorted.

"Actually," began Rubin argumentatively, "if you—"

Avalon cut in from his impressive height. "Well, see here, Jim, if he cheated, how did he get his Ph.D.?"

"Because there was never anything to *prove* he cheated."

"Did it ever occur to you," said Gonzalo, "that maybe he didn't cheat? Maybe it was really true that when he buckled down he had—what did you call it?—fire-cracking ability."

"No," said Drake, with another coffee-cup-rattling fist on the ta-

ble. "That's impossible. He never showed that kind of ability before and he never showed it afterward. Besides, he had that *confidence* all through the course. He had the confidence that could only mean he had worked out a foolproof plan to get his A."

Trumbull said, shrugging, "All right, say he did. He got his Ph.D. but he didn't do so well later on. From what you say he's just off in a corner somewhere, poking along. You know damn well, Jim, that lots of guys achieve high professional rank, even without cheating, who have all their brains in their elbows. So what? Why get mad at one particular guy who got away with it? You know why I think you're off your rocker on the subject, Jim? What gripes you is that you don't know *how* he did it. If you could figure it out you'd forget the whole thing."

Henry the waiter interrupted, "More brandy, gentlemen?"

Five delicate little glasses were raised. Avalon, who measured out his allowance with an eye dropper, kept his glass down.

Drake said, "Well, then, Tom, you tell me. How *did* he do it? You're the code expert."

"But there's no code involved. I don't know. Maybe he—he—managed to get someone else to take the test for him or handed in someone else's paper."

"In someone else's handwriting?" said Drake scornfully. "Besides, I thought of that. We all thought of it. You don't suppose I was the only one who knew Lance cheated, do you? We all knew it. When that 96 went up on the bulletin board, after we got our breath back—and that took a while—we demanded to see his paper. He handed it over with no objections and we all went over it. It was a near-perfect job, but it was unquestionably in his handwriting and contained his turns of phrase. I wasn't even impressed by the few errors he made. They were the sort he might have thrown in deliberately in order not to have a perfect paper."

"All right," said Gonzalo, "someone else somehow did the test for him and your friend copied it over in his own words and handwriting."

"Impossible. There was no one in the class but the students and St. George's assistant. The assistant opened the sealed test papers just before the test started. No one could have written one paper for Lance and another for himself, even if you could imagine it not having been observed. Besides, there wasn't anyone in the class capable of turning out a 96-level paper."

Avalon said, "If you were doing it right there, it would have

been impossible. But suppose Lance managed to get a copy of the questions well before the test and then swatted away at the textbooks till he had worked out perfect answers? Couldn't he have done that somehow?"

"No, he couldn't," said Drake flatly. "You're not suggesting anything we didn't think of then, take my word for it. The university had had a cheating scandal some years before and the whole test procedure had been tightened up. St. George followed this new procedure. He made up the questions and turned them in to his secretary the day before the test. She mimeographed the necessary number of copies in St. George's presence. He proofread them, then destroyed the originals, both his and the original mimeograph. The question papers were packaged and sealed and placed in the school safe. The safe was opened just before the test and handed to St. George's assistant. There was no way of Lance seeing the questions."

"Maybe not just then," said Avalon. "But even if St. George had the questions mimeographed the day before the test, how long might he have had the questions in his possession? Or he might have used a set of questions used on a previous—"

"No," interrupted Drake. "We carefully studied all previous tests prepared by St. George. Do you think we were fools? There was no duplication of questions."

"All right. But even if he prepared an entirely new test, he might have prepared it at the beginning of the semester. Lance might somehow have seen the questions early in the semester. It would be a lot easier to work out answers to a fixed number of questions during the course of the semester than to try to learn the entire subject matter."

"I think you've got something there, Jeff," said Gonzalo.

"He's got nothing there," snapped Drake, "because that's not the way St. George worked it. Every question in the final exam that semester turned on some particular point that some particular student goofed up on in class. One of them, and the most subtle, covered a point that I had missed in the very last week of lectures. I pointed out what I thought was a mistake in a derivation, and St. George—well, never mind. The point is, the test had to be prepared *after* the last lecture."

Arnold Stacey broke in. "Did St. George *always* do that? If he did, he would have been telegraphing a hell of a lot to the kids."

"You mean the students would have been expecting only

questions on errors that had been made in the discussion periods."

"More than that. The students could have deliberately pulled boners on those parts of the subject they actually knew in order to lure St. George into placing twenty-points'-worth on each phony boner."

Drake said, "I can't answer that. We weren't in his previous classes, so we didn't know if his previous tests followed the same pattern."

"Previous classes would have passed on the news, wouldn't they? At least, if classes in the forties were anything like classes now."

"They sure would have," Drake grinned, "and they didn't."

"Say, Jim," said Gonzalo, "how did Lance do in the discussion periods?"

"He kept quiet, played it safe. We all took it for granted he'd do that, so we weren't surprised."

Gonzalo said, "What about the department secretary? Couldn't Lance have wheedled her into telling him the questions? Or even have bribed her?"

Drake said grimly, "You don't know the secretary. Besides, he couldn't have. Nor could he have broken into the safe. From the nature of the questions, we could tell the exam had been made up in the last week before the exam was given, and during that last week he couldn't have done a thing."

"Are you sure?" asked Trumbull.

"You bet. It bugged us all that he was so damned confident. The rest of us were sea-green with the fear of flunking and he just kept *smiling*. On the day of the last lecture someone said, 'He's going to steal the question sheet.' Actually, *I* said it, but the others agreed and we decided to—to— Well, we kept an eye on him."

"You mean you never let him out of your sight?" demanded Avalon. "Did you watch at night in shifts? Did you follow him into the john?"

"Damn near. He was Burroughs' roommate and Burroughs was a light sleeper and swore he knew every time Lance turned over."

"Burroughs might have been drugged one night," said Rubin.

"He might have, but he didn't think so, and no one else thought so. Lance just didn't act suspicious in any way; he didn't even act annoyed at being watched."

"Did he know he was being watched?" said Rubin.

"He probably did. Every time he went somewhere he would grin and say, 'Who's coming along?'"

"Where did he go?"

"Just the normal places. He ate, drank, slept. He went to the school library or sat in his room. He went to the post office, the bank, places like that. We followed him up and down all of Berry's streets and roads. Besides—"

"Besides, what?" asked Trumbull.

"Besides, even if he could have gotten hold of the question paper, it could only have been in those few days before the test, maybe only the night before. He would have had to swat out the answers, being Lance. It would have taken him days and days of solid work over the books. If he could have answered them by just taking a look at them, he wouldn't have had to cheat; and he did practically no studying in that last week."

Rubin said sardonically, "It seems to me, Jim, you've painted yourself into a corner. Your man couldn't possibly have cheated."

"That's the whole point," cried Drake. "He *must* have cheated and he did it so cleverly that no one caught him. No one could even figure out how he did it. Tom's right. *That's* what gripes me."

And then Henry the waiter coughed. "If I may offer a suggestion, gentlemen?"

"Yes, Henry," said Trumbull.

"It seems to me, gentlemen, that you are too much at home with petty dishonesty to understand it very well."

"Why, Henry, you hurt me cruelly," said Avalon, with a smile, but his dark eyebrows curled down over his eyes.

"I mean no disrespect, gentlemen, but Mr. Rubin maintained that dishonesty has value. Mr. Trumbull thinks that Doctor Drake is annoyed only because the cheating was clever enough to escape detection, not because it existed, and perhaps all of you agree with that."

Gonzalo said, "I think you're hinting, Henry, that you're so honest that you're more sensitive to dishonesty than we are and therefore can understand it better."

Henry said, "I would almost think so, sir, in view of the fact that not one of you has commented on the one glaring improbability in Doctor Drake's story that seems to me to explain everything."

"What's that?" asked Drake.

"Why, Professor St. George's attitude, sir. Here is a professor who takes pride in flunking many of his students, who never has anyone get above the 80's on the final examination. And then a student who is known to be thoroughly mediocre—and I gather that everyone in the department, both faculty and students, knew of that mediocrity—gets a 96 and the professor accepts that and even backs him before the qualifying committee. Surely he would have been the first one to suspect dishonesty. And most indignantly, too."

Drake said, "Maybe he couldn't bring himself to admit that he could be cheated on."

Henry said, "You keep finding excuses, sir. In any situation in which a professor asks questions and a student answers them, one always feels that if there is dishonesty, it is always the *student's* dishonesty. Why? What if it were the *professor* who was dishonest?"

Drake said, "What would he get out of that?"

"What does one usually get? Money, I suspect, sir. The situation as you described it is that of a student who was very well off financially and a professor who had the kind of salary a professor used to get in those days before government grants. Suppose the student had offered a few thousand dollars—"

"For what? To hand in a fake mark? We saw Lance's answer paper and it was absolutely legitimate. To let Lance see the questions before having them mimeographed? It wouldn't have done Lance any good—he wouldn't have had the time to memorize the answers."

"Look at it in reverse, sir. Suppose the student offered a few thousand dollars to let him, the student, give the professor the questions."

"Suppose, sir," Henry went on patiently, "that it was Mr. Lance Faron who made up the questions, one by one, in the course of the semester. He picked on interesting errors that came up in class, never talking during the discussions so that he could listen more closely. He polished the questions as the semester proceeded. As Mr. Avalon said, it is easier to get a few specific points straight than to learn the entire subject matter. Then he deliberately and cleverly included one question from the last week's lectures, making you all sure the test had been entirely created in that last week. It also meant he turned out a test quite different from St. George's usual tests. Previous tests in the course had not turned

on students' errors. Nor did later ones, if I may judge from Doctor Stacey's surprise. Then at the end of the course, with the test paper completed, he simply mailed it to the professor."

"Mailed it?" said Gonzalo.

"Doctor Drake said the young man visited the post office. So he could have mailed it. Professor St. George would have received the questions with, perhaps, part of the payment in small bills. He would then have written it over in his own handwriting, or typing, and passed it on to his secretary. From then on all would be normal. And of course the professor would have had to back the student thereafter all the way."

"Why not?" said Gonzalo enthusiastically. "It makes sense!"

Drake said slowly, "I've got to admit that's a possibility that never occurred to any of us. But, of course, we'll never know."

Stacey broke in loudly. "I've hardly said a word all evening, though I was told I'd be grilled."

"Sorry about that," said Trumbull. "This meathead, Drake, had a story to tell because you came from Berry."

"Well, then, because I come from Berry, let me add something to the story. Professor St. George died the year I came to Berry, as I said, and I didn't really know him. But I know many people who did know him and I've heard many things about him."

"You mean he was known to be dishonest?" asked Drake.

"No one said that. But he was known to be unscrupulous and I've heard some unsavory hints about how he maneuvered government grants into yielding him a personal income. When I heard your story about Lance, Jim, I must admit I didn't think St. George would be involved in quite that way. But now that Henry has taken the trouble to think the unthinkable from the mountain height of his own honesty—why, I believe he's right."

Trumbull said, "Then that's that. Jim, after thirty years, you can forget the whole thing."

"Except—except—" A half smile came over Drake's face and then he broke into a laugh. "I *am* dishonest because I can't help thinking that if Lance had the questions all along, the creep might have passed on a hint or two to the rest of us."

"After you had all laughed at him, sir?" asked Henry quietly, and he began to clear the table.

"Q"

Joyce Harrington

The Plastic Jungle

We hope you didn't miss Joyce Harrington's first story—"The Purple Shroud," in the September 1972 issue of EQMM. It was an exceptional debut in print. But Joyce Harrington's second story is even better, even more impressive—a subtly conceived, sensitively written study in crime, as contemporary, as modern in feeling as tonight's late news . . .

66 **I**f you stay in the Soft Goods you'll be all right."

My mother's voice comes to me and I go on combing my hair. My hair is quite long now. I haven't cut it for four years, except when my girl friend, Alexis, trims the ends. Alexis' family is Syrian and my mother doesn't like me to pal around with her. Oh, God! There she goes again.

"Don't go in the Housewares Department. Mimi, do you hear me? Don't even go near it. It's not safe. Answer me."

She's standing in the doorway. Momma, don't you want me to get you a nice new scrub brush so you can scrub out the rest of your life? No. Be nice to Momma, she's at a hard time in her life. My sister says. My sister who lives in Great Neck and doesn't have to listen listen listen, and come up with an answer. I put on some lipstick and try to say something.

"Momma, I'm only going to buy a bathing suit."

The lipstick is crooked and I wipe it off. Forget it. I stuff things into my shoulder bag. She comes into the room and sits down on the bed plop like that. She dumps herself down when she sits. Always. Like a sack of somebody else's dirty laundry she's carried around too long. The bed shakes.

"A bathing suit, anh. What, one piece or two?"

"I don't know, Momma. I'll see what they have. Maybe I won't get anything."

I'm ready to go, but I haven't been released yet. I have to wait until all the questions have been asked. Until all the wrong an-

swers have been given. There aren't any right answers.

"A bikini? Don't bring home a bikini. You bring home a bikini, I'll send it right back."

She won't though.

"All right, Momma. No bikini."

"You're going with that Alexis? She's not a nice girl, Mimi. I saw her in the pizza place smoke a cigarette."

So what should she be smoking, a cigar? No. My mother is still fighting the Six Days' War. Alexis is an Arab guerrilla who kills Israeli babies. Would she like to see me in khaki shorts with a rifle on my back? Marching? Singing? Shooting Alexis? Would she?

"No, Momma. I'm going by myself."

"Don't lie to me. You never go downtown by yourself. Why can't you go with a nice girl like Rose next door?"

"No, really, Momma. This time I'm going alone."

Because Rose is a nice fat girl and it hurts both of us to go shopping together. Could you understand that, Momma? That Rose couldn't wear a bikini, and she would have to say they all looked terrible. And I would have to say something bitchy about her flab, and then we couldn't speak to each other for a week.

"You have enough money?"

Her hand is in her apron pocket pulling out the old black-leather change purse.

"Yes, I have enough. I have to go now."

"Here. Here, prices go up overnight. Everything goes up, nothing comes down. Just in case."

A weary crumpled five-dollar bill gets shoved into my shoulder bag. At last I can go. I head for the door.

"Thanks, Momma."

Her voice follows me to the front door.

"Be home for supper. Be careful. Don't go in the Toys, they're all plastic."

Out.

I go along Westminster Road and turn toward the subway. What do you do when your mother is crazy? Is everybody's mother crazy or only mine? She worries about plastic, she's afraid of it. Never mind about drugs, about Vietnam, about crime in the streets. My mother carries on a pogrom against plastic.

It's a menace, she says, and she won't have it in the house. I

have to keep all my records at Lex's house. My sister says maybe she wouldn't be like this if my father was still alive and if my brother lived closer and if she wasn't having a hard time with the change of life. If. But the fact is that my father is dead and my brother lives in New Mexico and my mother is crazy. Be nice, my sister says, go along with it. It's harmless.

I reach the subway steps and go up. The subway is out in the open here. Not really elevated, but running on tracks above the ground. Nice, to ride along seeing daylight and the backs of houses. Alexis is waiting for me on the platform.

My brother the college professor in New Mexico sends his monthly letter with a check or his monthly check with a letter. He helps out. It's very hot in New Mexico, they moved from their apartment to a little house near the college, there's a nice back yard for Jemmy to play in, they are expecting another baby in October and he didn't write that sooner because he wanted to be sure everything was okay. His wife, Eleanor, had a miscarriage last year and Momma got so upset she had to go to bed for a week.

Momma reads me the letter after supper. She cries.

"Why New Mexico," she moans, "so far away? Might as well be China. He couldn't get a job in New York?"

I'm eating my dessert while she's crying. She makes very good apple cake and my mouth is full of it. But I can't swallow.

"You could go visit them." I mumble around the cake and finally get it down. "You could go out there, take care of Eleanor, take care of Jemmy."

That does it. The tears disappear, dry as the Negev, dry as New Mexico, no more irrigation canals down the cheeks.

"Oh, yes, Madam. Who would take care of you? You are not yet as big as you think you are."

Right on, Momma. I'm not as big as I think. But who is? You, my little shriveled Momma with tear spots like watermelon pits on your blue wash-and-wear permanent-press coverall apron with a daisy on the pocket from Sears Roebuck?

"I could go and stay with Celia."

And spend the summer being built-in, unpaid nosewiper for that batch of my mother's grandchildren. Listening to my beautiful sister, the heroic mother of three, complain about life as the doctor's wife. (He's never here when I need him, and when he is here

he's too tired.) Who told her to marry the doctor?

"Momma."

That's right. Blow the nose. You look great. It's all red.

"Momma. I could go stay with Celia. You could go out to Sam and Eleanor."

More Kleenex. Stuff it in the pocket. What does she do with all that damp Kleenex? Iron it out and use it again? Put it away neatly in a drawer for my inheritance? I give and bequeath to my youngest daughter, Mimi the Nuisance, all the Kleenex I cried into during her lifetime.

"Celia has enough to worry about. You think she needs you besides?"

Thanks. That may be the nicest thing you've said to me all day.

I push back my chair and start to clear the table. The dishes are odds and ends of old sets, chipped and cracked, replacements picked out of dirty bushel baskets set out on the sidewalk in front of Benny's Bargain Bazaar. When my father died, the good dishes, two sets, were packed up and shipped out to Great Neck. To Celia because she has a family and keeps a kosher home. We don't bother any more. It's my personal opinion that Celia stayed kosher just long enough to get her hands on those dishes and, of course, when Momma comes to visit. I start to wash the crummy dishes.

"So where's the bathing suit? Let's see this year's free show at Jones Beach." She's still sitting at the table, sipping her third cup of tea. The tears are gone, the Kleenex is gone, and she's ready for the next round.

"It's in my room. I got a job, Momma." I'm splashing around with the brown soap and the greasy dishwater (Momma won't get detergent because it comes in plastic bottles) with my back to her waiting for the eruption. It doesn't come. Nothing.

"Did you hear me, Momma? I got a job." I look over my shoulder and she's sitting kind of crooked in her chair with her eyes closed and her mouth open and her face turning blue. I should have known.

Then I'm yelling, "Momma, stop it!" But she doesn't stop it. So I grab the bottle of ammonia from under the sink, and my hands are dripping dishwater all over the clean floor, and the bottle slips, of course, but I finally get it under her nose and she breathes again. She gasps, she wheezes, she groans, and a few more tears roll down the old tracks.

"Come on, Momma. Go to bed."

"How can I go to bed? You made such a mess on the floor. Now I'll have to mop it all over again."

"Never mind. I'll clean it up. You go to bed."

She lets me take her arm and start leading her out of the kitchen. She's all bent over like she's cuddling a pain next to her heart.

"I'm old and sick and all you want is to leave me. So get a job. What kind of a job could you get? You can't even wash dishes without flooding the kitchen." All this with more wheezes and groans, and she stumbles on the doorsill and nearly falls down. "It's just like the time with the plastic geraniums. Remember what the doctor said."

"Do you want a doctor now, Momma?"

"Who can afford a doctor? Who can afford to be sick? I'll go to bed and maybe I'll still be alive in the morning."

I get her into bed with two pillows and a heating pad. The television at the foot of the bed with the remote control next to her hand, this morning's *Daily News* and a copy of *TV Guide*. The television has plastic knobs, but somehow Momma missed that. As I head back to the kitchen to mop up the five water spots that make a deluge, her voice quavers after me.

"Mimi, be a good girl and bring a cup of tea and don't put too much sugar. And don't slop it in the saucer."

Okay.

While I'm waiting for the kettle to boil I'm thinking about Momma and the plastic geraniums. That was the start of it all. Almost a year ago. She had this box on the kitchen window full of plastic geraniums. She used to try to grow real ones but the window never got much sun, and she would forget to water them. So, okay, the plastic ones. They were bright red and always in bloom, and she liked them. No problems.

Then one day, she was hanging the laundry on the clothesline from that window, and she had a mild heart attack. That's what the doctor said. A mild heart attack. Take life easy, Mrs., and you'll be all right. You are not a young woman any more. You don't have to polish your house from morning to night. Did my dear Momma hear that? No.

When it was all over and she was back on her feet, all she could remember was that she was leaning over the geraniums and sud-

denly she couldn't breathe. The geraniums were out to get her. The plastic was stealing the air from her lungs. I came home from school one day and found her in the middle of one of the biggest house-cleanings I'd ever seen, even from Momma who is a champ in this field. And everything plastic was in the garbage can. Even my hair rollers and now I have to use frozen orange juice cans.

The kettle is screaming, so I make a cup of tea medium strong with a spoon and a half of sugar no milk and put a paper napkin on the saucer. I take it in to her but she's asleep half sitting up with the lights on, the television on, the heating pad on. I turn everything off and tiptoe back to the kitchen and drink the tea myself. The job will be first on the agenda at breakfast. If I like it maybe I won't go back to school in the fall.

The job is okay. I mean, it's no big deal, but it's kind of fun and it's nice to have a little extra money. Momma finally stopped moaning about it when she found out it was in the Infants' Wear Department where I would be relatively safe and I could get a nice discount on things for the grandbabies. It's part time. I work three days a week and still have enough time to go to the beach and get a decent suntan. Alexis is working here, too, in the Bath Boutique, but I didn't tell Momma that.

Every morning Momma packs me a lunch in a brown paper bag which I am supposed to eat in the employees' lunchroom. She's in one of her quiet periods now, knitting a sweater set with booties for Sam and Eleanor's new baby. Only complaining about the butcher (he's giving short weight), the heat (you don't feel it, Mimi, you spend all day in an air-conditioned store), and the plastic jungle (it sneaks up on you, Mimi, and soaks up all the air, so somebody should do something).

Every morning I take the brown paper lunch and shove it in my shoulder bag. Thank God the shoulder bag is big enough and I don't have to carry the lunch in my hand like a little kid. Sometimes I eat it, but sometimes Lex and I, we meet some guys we know from school, and then we goof around downtown at lunchtime and maybe have a hamburger or some pizza or something.

Momma should know, she'd really flip. I wonder sometimes if I told her, which would be worse, throwing her lunch away or meeting guys. With Momma you never know.

Every night we play twenty questions. What did you do today, Mimi? That's the way it starts. Then I have to tell her every item

I sold, who I sold it to, was she pregnant and how far along, what the grandmothers are buying, what new items the store has in for babies. It's almost like she was jealous, like she wishes she could be me, working in that dumb store. I mean the store is okay. It's only that when I have to tell her all about it, it sounds so stupid.

And always the last question, the wrap-up like they say on the television news. Did you eat your lunch, Mimi? Someday the president of the store is going to call her up and say I'm sorry Mrs. but your daughter was eating your brown paper lunch today in the employees' lunchroom and she choked on it.

Tonight a surprise. It's Thursday night and I've been working late. Momma has a snack waiting for me on the kitchen table, and she's waiting for me with a funny smile on her face.

"Guess what, Mimila?" She can't wait for me to sit down, wash my hands even. It's like she's about to explode with something. Maybe she won the lottery. She thinks I don't know she buys tickets and hides them.

"What, Momma?"

"Tomorrow I'm coming downtown! How do you like that?" She sits back in her chair with her hands on her thighs and her elbows out like she's just been crowned Queen of England.

"That's great, Momma." What are you gonna do? It is great. She hasn't been downtown since the plastic menace started. Maybe she's getting herself straightened out. Maybe she'll be all right now.

"One thing, Madam. I'm going to check up on you. See what kind of people you spend your days with. You can't be too careful."

"Momma! They're just people, salesgirls. What's to be careful?"

"And, believe me, if there's any plastic in that Baby Department I'm getting you transferred out of there. You'll thank me for it. You'll see."

There's no stopping her now. I'm wondering what happened today to set her off. And I'm thinking what she'll do when she sees all the baby bottles and potty chairs and rattles and junk at the counter next to mine.

"Momma, I only sell beautiful baby blankets and beautiful cloth diapers and beautiful clothes for beautiful babies. I don't touch any plastic. You don't have to come."

"Oh, yes, Madam. You don't want me to come." Now she's standing over me triumphant, and my feet are hurting from

standing all day, and my head is beginning to feel like my feet.

"You don't know what I saw today, do you?" She's really in full swing now and all I can do is listen. "Down by the bakery I was. And out in front was a baby in a carriage drinking milk from a bottle. The mother was in the bakery and the baby was outside. So there I was looking in the window and thinking I might buy a loaf of seeded rye, and this baby starts crying and throws the bottle. What happened, Mimi? What happened?"

"Don't tell me. Momma, where's the aspirin? I got a headache."

"Don't try to change the subject. The bottle didn't break. The bottle did not break! And why not? *PLASTIC!*"

Momma is the picture of outrage, the protector of innocent babies from the plastic menace. Her arms are flapping a mile a minute, and her little body is stiff with indignation.

"So what did you do, Momma?"

"What did I do? What would you do? I picked up that plastic bottle and I dropped it down the sewer. That's what I did. Some mothers don't care what happens to their babies. The Mayor should make an emergency speech on television."

"Great, Momma. Why don't you tell him? In the meantime, is there any aspirin in the house?"

I'm holding my head in my two hands now because it feels like it's trying to break in half, and also so I can put my hands over my ears.

"There's some in my sewing box." Momma never keeps medicine in the medicine chest. God forbid anybody should be sick and not let her know about it. "Don't take more than two."

She follows me into her bedroom while I look for the aspirin and back to the kitchen for a glass of water, and her voice never stops.

"So the second thing I'm going to do tomorrow is buy two dozen regular glass bottles and send to Eleanor. They still make glass baby bottles, Mimi? I can't depend on Eleanor to be careful. She let Sam take a job so far away, how can I be sure she won't drown that baby in plastic?"

I swallow the aspirin and decide there's only one escape left. "Momma, I'm going to take a hot bath."

"Don't fall asleep in the tub. Remember, I'll see you in the Baby Department around eleven. Maybe we'll have lunch in Schrafft's. Sleep good, Mimila."

Later on I'm lying in bed watching shadows on the ceiling. My

head is calmed down and my feet are just tingling but not hurting. Once in a while a car goes by and the lights race across the ceiling and down the wall.

I'm thinking about the times Momma and I used to go shopping and she knew that store inside out, where all the bargain counters were and what days there were special sales. It used to be fun to go with her, even though she never let me pick out my own clothes.

I remember one time I got lost in the store and they took me to the office on the eighth floor and said they would make an announcement over the loudspeaker. But Momma was there in the office before we got there. So we didn't get announced, and Momma only yelled at me a little, and then took me to the Toy Department and bought me a stuffed dog.

I'm lying here in bed thinking about those old things, and some tears are running down the sides of my head and getting in my ears, and I'm wishing for something to happen between now and tomorrow morning so Momma won't come downtown.

The next morning I'm dressed and out of the house before she gets up. She'll be mad I didn't eat breakfast, but I stop at Lex's house and have coffee and Danish and tell her what Momma's up to. Neither one of us can think of any way to head her off, so we go on to the store together.

All morning I'm so nervous I keep dropping things. I give the wrong change for a twenty-dollar bill and the customer yells at me and I almost yell back at her. Finally it's time for my break and I meet Lex in the coffee shop, but I can't eat anything. My hand is shaking so, of course, I spill my coffee all over the counter. The waitress comes to wipe it up and says "Clumsy" under her breath but just loud enough for me to hear, which she would never do if we were regular customers.

So I say, "Lex, I'm going back," and I go without leaving a tip and without even finishing my coffee break.

Angie, the regular full-time lady who works the baby counter with me, sees I'm not feeling so good, and she says, "It's not so busy right now, Mimi. Why don't you put away some of that stock?"

So for the next half hour I have my mind occupied with sorting out little undershirts and nightgowns and training pants and

stuff, and things are pretty quiet before the noontime rush, so I don't even notice when eleven o'clock comes and goes. And no Momma. I'm just sort of standing there in the middle of a pile of diapers, looking at the clock over the elevators which says a quarter after, and thinking, She's not coming. She's not coming.

Then the next to the last elevator opens and Alexis gets off and starts running toward me. Alexis is naturally very olive-skinned, but this is the first time I ever saw her look green.

I start to say "What's the matter?" But she just grabs my arm and starts pulling me to the elevator and it's like she can't say anything, but she finally manages to get it out.

"Your mother!" she says and then clams up and won't look at me in the elevator. And I shout, "My mother what?" And I'm thinking all the things Momma could do to make Alexis look like that, and what was she doing on Alexis' floor anyway which has the Bath Boutique and Housewares and the Pet Shop.

And then the elevator is stopping and we're getting off, and over to the right there's a crowd of people. Alexis is pulling me that way and starts shoving through the crowd, and a fat lady says, "Who do you think you're pushing?" But Alexis just lets her have it in the corset and starts yelling to the store guards who are trying to hold everybody back. "Here she is, here's her daughter!" And then Alexis starts crying.

I still can't see anything, but one of the guards takes my hand and makes a path for me through the crowd. In the middle of the open space there's a little bundle on the floor covered with a plastic shower curtain. There are shoes sticking out at one end, and I can see that they are Momma's best comfortable shoes a little rundown at the heels. I don't want to see what's at the other end. Maybe it's some other old lady wearing Momma's shoes.

The guards are shouting, "Stand back, stand back! It's all over." But nobody moves, and I can hear a loud voice saying over and over, "I saw it all happen. She got off the elevator and walked over here like she knew where she was going. Then all of a sudden she got this funny look on her face like she was lost. She looked like a little lost kid. And then she just fell down. I tried to get her sitting up, but she wasn't even breathing."

Then somebody is saying, "Are you the daughter?" My head is nodding yes, yes, yes, and I look and see it's the store manager and behind him is a short guy with a mustache and a black bag, and I guess he's the doctor. The store manager is holding my arm

very tight like he's afraid maybe I'll scream or faint or something, and the doctor goes over and pulls back the shower curtain which is green with daisies all over it.

The doctor listens and looks and shakes his head, and then he looks up at me and says, "Is this your mother?" My head is still nodding yes, yes, yes, and Alexis is holding onto my other arm and bawling as if it was her mother. But I'm just standing there nodding and looking at Momma on the floor with a stack of yellow plastic dishpans on one side of her and a mountain of avocado-green plastic garbage cans on the other and at the end of the aisle a display of bright red plastic geraniums.

Some guys in white jackets come up with a stretcher on wheels, and the doctor is saying "Did she have a heart condition? Is there somebody you can call?" And the store manager says, "You can call from my office." So off we go to call Celia, with the store manager still hanging onto one arm and Alexis on the other, and she's saying, "You can come and stay with me."

But I'm thinking, now I'll have to go and live with Celia. Unless I can go stay with Sam and Eleanor. And I'm thinking I won't have much trouble choosing between Albuquerque and Great Neck if I have any choice. And then I'm thinking, I wonder how come I forgot to tell Momma they moved the Baby Department to the fourth floor and put the Housewares where the Baby Department used to be.



Hugh Pentecost

Jericho and the Deadly Errand

John Jericho, the redheaded, redbearded giant of a painter, was thinking of the old days in Paris, when his career was just starting, when he felt immensely alive—and was mildly in love. And then it happened—the strange sort of thing that occurs so often in real life: the very girl he was remembering appeared out of the blue, needing his help. And Jericho, the fighter for the underdog, the fighter against the overdog, never turned down anyone in distress, and certainly not a love out of his past. Jericho is the Good Samaritan of contemporary detectives . . .

Detective: JOHN JERICHO

It was a chance meeting with an old love, almost forgotten with the passage of years, that brought John Jericho face to face with a violent murder. Words spoken to him in the strictest confidence set him on a path totally different from the ones taken by the police and the District Attorney's staff. That he walked that path at all was due to a blazing anger that made it imperative for him, personally, to see to it that Justice was not blind.

What developed into a bloody horror began in the most pleasant of ways. It was a summer day in New York City, one of those rare blue-sky days without smog or unbearable humidity. The sky was cloudless. Jericho, walking uptown on Fifth Avenue, felt younger than he was and carefree. This was a coincidence because, unsuspecting, he was about to encounter his youth again. He found himself thinking of a day like this in Paris, ten years or more ago, when he had been sitting at an outdoor café with friends, drinking a particularly good wine, watching the world go by, and thinking how marvelous it was just to be alive. He had been a

young artist in those days, just launching a career that was to make him world-famous. The future hadn't seemed too important that day in Paris—just the present, the joy of being alive and doing what he wanted to do, of being mildly in love.

Remembering that, Jericho now paused at a crossing and looking east saw a sign outside a building: *WILLARD'S BACK YARD*. This was an expensive little restaurant he could afford to patronize in these days of success, and in the summer months there was a charming outdoor garden, shaded by awnings and potted trees. It would be pleasant to sit there and drink a glass of wine and remember Paris. So he turned east and went into Willard's.

Coincidences are the enemies of fiction writers, but life is full of them. Willard's was filling up for luncheon, but Willard, an old friend, found Jericho a table in the garden. People turned to look at him as he was led to his place. He was eye-catching: six feet four inches tall, 240 pounds of solid muscle, with flaming red hair and a blazing red beard.

He sat down, ordered a split of champagne, filled and lit a black curve-stemmed pipe, and leaned back to watch the world go by, just as he had years ago in Paris.

A woman was led to a table a few yards away from Jericho and he looked at her, enjoying her as he always enjoyed looking at beautiful women. She was, he guessed, in her very early thirties, expensively dressed, with an unusual personal electricity. There was something familiar about her, he thought—the familiar charm of a woman of taste and experience, without a veneer of toughness. This kind was rare—familiar but rare.

The woman looked at him, her dark violet eyes widening. "Johnny?" she said. It was a question.

She was no stranger. The absurd thing was that he had been thinking about her as he walked up Fifth Avenue, thinking of her as she had been ten or more years ago, thinking of her as she had been in Paris when he was mildly in love with her.

"Fay!"

He went over to her table and her small cool hands were in his.

"The beard," she said. "I wasn't sure for a moment."

He had been a smooth-faced young man in Paris. "May I join you? Are you expecting someone?"

"Please. No," she said.

He beckoned to the waiter to bring his wine.

"It's wild," she said. "I came in here because I was thinking of you and the old days."

"ESP," he said. "That's exactly what happened to me."

"Oh, Johnny!"

He ordered a stinger for her. Her taste couldn't have changed. Nothing had changed. He said something to that effect.

"I wear a size twelve dress today," she said. "It was an eight back in those days. That much has changed."

She had been a model in those Paris times. She had also been a member of a young group of Revolutionaries bent on destroying the establishment in general and General de Gaulle in particular. Jericho had thought of them as crackbrained and lovable, particularly Fay. She had posed for him and they had made love and she had forgotten about the Revolution. There had been no anxieties, no guilts, no regrets when they came to the inevitable parting.

"Of course I've kept track of you, Johnny. You're famous now. I've gone to all your exhibitions, including your one-man show at the Mullins Gallery last month."

"You're living in New York?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you never tried to get in touch with me? I'm in the phone book."

"So am I. You've forgotten, Johnny, that it was you who walked out. You would have to do the getting in touch—if you wanted to."

"I was young and stupid," he said. "I always thought of you as still being back in that other world, taking pot shots at General de Gaulle."

She laughed. "We were pretty crazy kids, weren't we? No, I came back here right after we broke up. I am a respectable secretary now, for a man in the brokerage business. You may have heard of him. He's in the news these days. Lloyd Parker."

"He's running for the United States Senate. That your man?"

She nodded. A tiny frown edged lines in her forehead. "A fine man," she said. "A good warm idealistic man."

Her man? Jericho wondered. Something in her voice—

"I don't have very good luck with men, Johnny," she said, reading his mind. She'd been like that in the old days. "First it was you who mattered. You walked out. Then there was—is—Lloyd Parker. I am his efficient, loyal, ever-ready office machine. He couldn't get along without me—in the office. Out of the office he

is married to a beautiful, exotic, fabulously rich gal. Crandall Steel—she was Ellen Crandall. I am the classic figure of the secretary hopelessly in love with her boss, preferring to work with him every day and not have him rather than drop him and find someone who might want me as a woman.”

“There are probably a hundred such someones,” Jericho said.

She seemed not to hear that. “I was thinking of you when I came in here, Johnny, because I need help.”

“Oh?”

“I need advice from someone who understands how complex people are; who wouldn’t make judgments by hard and fast rules. I thought that of all the people I’d ever known you never prejudged, never insisted that all people follow black-and-white formulas.” She tried a smile. “I thought that if I could only get advice from you—and presto, here you are.”

“Try me, before I make improper advances,” he said, answering her smile.

Her frown returned and stayed fixed. “Lloyd is running against a man named Molloy—Mike Molloy to his friends. Molloy is a machine politician, supported by the big-city moguls, the hard-hats, the labor bosses. Perhaps not a bad man, Johnny, but not a man of Lloyd’s caliber, not a potential statesman, not in any way an idealist. Lloyd could be Presidential material in the future. Molloy belongs to other men. Lloyd belongs to himself and his country.”

“He can have my vote.”

“Lloyd is about forty-five. He has always had a little money. His family was Plymouth Rock-Mayflower stuff. I say ‘a little money’ in comparison to his wife’s fortune. He was graduated from Harvard in the late forties, having missed the War. He knew that sooner or later he would be faced with the Army, and he didn’t know what he wanted to do, really. A college friend persuaded him to put some money into a business, one of the first computer-dating services. Lloyd had nothing to do with the operation of the business; he was just a part owner. Someone blew the whistle on them. Lloyd’s partner was using information they gathered to blackmail clients. He was indicted, convicted, and sent to prison. Lloyd was cleared.”

“So?”

“After that came the Army in Korea. One day Lloyd’s top sergeant asked him to mail a package for him. On the way to the

post office Lloyd was stopped by M.P.s and it was discovered that the package contained about thirty thousand dollars in cash. The sergeant, it turned out, had been stealing the P.X. blind. There was a court-martial. The sergeant went to Leavenworth. Lloyd was cleared. He had simply been an innocent messenger boy."

"But not lucky with his friends or connections," Jericho said.

"Neither of these things was a great scandal at the time," Fay said. "They've been long forgotten. But suddenly they've reappeared in Wardell Lewis' political column. Lewis is supporting Molloy. Someone has fed him these two old stories, along with some malicious gossip about a love affair which Lloyd is supposed to have broken off in order to marry the Crandall money."

"A love affair with you, Fay?"

"No," she said sharply. "There is some truth in it, though. He did have an affair with a girl, he did break it off, he did marry Ellen Crandall five years ago. Lewis is using all this and I've been trying to find out who's been feeding Lewis this information."

"Any luck? The partner, the sergeant, the dropped girl?"

Fay shook her head. She looked at Jericho, her eyes wide. "Ellen, Lloyd's wife, is having an affair with Wardell Lewis."

"Wow!" Jericho said.

"Of course Lloyd has no knowledge of it," Fay said. "That's what creates my problem. He loves his wife deeply. If he learns the truth, I think it will destroy him. What do I do? Do I go to Lloyd and wreck his life with the truth? Do I go to her and Lewis and threaten them with exposure? They would laugh at me. Exposure, beyond what it might do to Lloyd personally, would ruin his political future. A cuckolded candidate for the Senate becomes a national joke." Fay brought her closed fist down on the table. "What do I do, Johnny?"

"Have another stinger," he said, wondering just what she should do. She obviously was in love with the man.

Jericho didn't come up with an immediate answer for Fay Martin. Parker, his wife, and Wardell Lewis were not real people to him. They were X, Y, and Z in a problem. Fay was real, very real. She had set out to help a man she loved and she could only help him, it developed, by hurting him terribly. It mattered to her whether or not Lloyd Parker won an election; but it mattered even more that he not be hurt.

The only thing that occurred to Jericho was that there might be a way to silence Wardell Lewis without using Ellen Parker's adultery as the weapon. Lewis' kind of muckraking journalism suggested the kind of man who might well have skeletons in his own closet. Jericho had friends. He would, he promised Fay, put something in motion.

Would she have dinner with him? That was impossible. She had to go to a public debate that was being held up in Westchester between Parker and Molloy. She would, however, join him for lunch again tomorrow. By then he might have dug up something that could be used as leverage against Lewis. A newspaperman and a friend in the District Attorney's office would nose around for Jericho. But Jericho promised he would not tell either of them about the triangle.

The next morning Jericho woke early as usual. He was in his apartment on Jefferson Mews in Greenwich Village. When he came out of the shower he switched on the radio to hear the eight o'clock news. What he heard turned him to stone.

Fay Martin was dead.

The facts, put together from the radio account and from the morning papers, were as follows: the debate between Lloyd Parker and Mike Molloy was to be held in the auditorium of the Community Center Building in White Hills. Parker and his wife had driven out there in his Cadillac and left the car, locked, in the parking area. Shortly before the debate was to begin, Parker's secretary, Fay Martin, had come out to the parking area and asked the attendant where the Parker Cadillac had been left. She identified herself and showed the man keys. Parker, she said, had left something he needed in the Cadillac's glove compartment.

The attendant pointed out where the car was and watched her go to it. She unlocked the door, got in, and leaned forward to open the glove compartment. An explosion blew the car and Fay to bits, started a raging fire, and severely damaged a half dozen other cars parked nearby.

The debate was never held. Some odd facts were turned up by the police. Parker, in a state of shock, denied that he had sent Fay to the car to get anything for him. She had, he told police, come to White Hills in her own car to make sure everything was in order for the debate. He hadn't sent her out to his car for anything. There wasn't anything he needed. Furthermore, he insisted

that she didn't have a set of keys for the car, which he had locked himself. There was only one set of keys, his own, and he had them in his pocket. There was no other set! Why Fay had gone to the car and where she had got a set of keys was completely inexplicable to Parker.

The police were certain the bomb had been planted in the glove compartment and rigged so that when the compartment door was opened, the bomb would go off. The bomb had obviously been meant to kill Parker, the police said, since he was the only person who drove the Cadillac and the only person who had keys to it.

Except that there must have been a second set of keys.

Mrs. Ellen Parker confirmed her husband's statement. There was no second set of keys that she knew of. She had her own car—she never drove her husband's Cadillac.

Public outrage was high. People were sick of bombings and assassinations. A political analyst expressed the opinion that Parker, who had been running behind Molloy in the polls, would now be an odds-on favorite to win the election. Sympathy would push him into the lead. The Molloy forces would be high on the suspect list. Innocent as it might be, the Molloy machine had been put behind the eight-ball.

Jericho, his muscles aching from tension, didn't give a damn about the election.

Fay was dead—loyal, dedicated Fay, in love with a man who had passed her by for ten years, and for whom she had been murdered.

Someone must have handed Fay a set of keys, probably saying they were Parker's. "He wants you to get an envelope he left in the glove compartment of his car." Of course she had gone, cheerfully. She would have done anything in the world for Parker without question. Whoever gave her the keys, not Parker's, had to know what would happen when the glove compartment door was opened. The bomb hadn't been meant for Parker, not ever.

Fay was dead, and it had been meant that she should die.

Do you set an elaborate and dangerous trap to kill a girl simply because she has found out about a case of adultery? What did Ellen Parker have to lose if her affair with Lewis became public? She had all the money in the world; she was tired of her husband.

What did Lewis have to lose? His man-about-town reputation would only be enhanced by the news that Ellen Parker was his

latest conquest. This was 1972, not 1872. Infidelity was no longer a "curiosity." Fay had wanted to keep Parker from learning the truth about his wife. To kill her to keep her silent made no sense, not when she would have kept silent under any circumstances.

But she had known something, or had done something, that called for violence—something, Jericho concluded, that she hadn't mentioned to him during their brief reunion.

The police, Jericho learned from his friend in the D.A.'s office, were still working on the theory that the bomb had been meant for Parker. Experts had put together small pieces. The bomb had evidently been a simple device—sticks of dynamite tied together, set off by a Fourth of July cap and triggered when the glove compartment door was opened. The killer didn't have to be an explosives expert.

There was simply no way to guess who had sent Fay on her deadly errand. She had died with that information unrevealed. The unexplained set of keys to the car was a puzzle. Parker, under persistent questioning, remembered that when he'd bought the Cadillac a year ago there had been a duplicate set of keys. He'd put them "in a safe place" and now hadn't the faintest recollection where that had been. Ellen Parker denied all knowledge of them. Fay might have known, but Fay was dead. The dead kept their secrets and the living would lie to suit their own purposes.

Jericho, convinced that the bomb had not been meant for Parker, was inclined to bypass the Molloy forces. Parker, dead by violence, could do nothing but harm them. Parker's forces could run Mickey Mouse and win. Molloy could only be involved if Fay had discovered something criminal about him and had kept it to herself long enough for Molloy's men to rig her death. But it didn't make sense. If she was a danger to Molloy he would have struck swiftly and less obviously, and would have made sure that it didn't appear to have been aimed at Parker.

Yesterday had been a bluesky day, a day for reunions, a day to remember a carefree time, a day to promise help. Today the skies were dark and the rain, wind-swept, was swirling in the gutters. Too late for promises, but not too late to demand payment in full.

A man wearing a slicker and a brown rain hat stood in the foyer of a remodeled brownstone on the east side. He had a bright red beard and his eyes were pale blue, and cold as two newly

minted dimes. He had stood there while half a dozen people left the building to go to work, and two or three tradesmen arrived to deliver orders. The building's custodian had approached him on the subject of loitering, and a crisp ten-dollar bill had changed hands.

At about eleven o'clock a taxi stopped outside the building. A woman got out and ran across the sidewalk to the sanctuary of the foyer. She was a tall, very beautiful, very chic blonde. She looked at Jericho with a kind of detached curiosity as she pressed one of the doorbells in the brass nameplate board. The ring was a signal—one short, one long, two shorts. The woman's picture had been in the paper that morning, so Jericho had no doubts about her. "The Beautiful Mrs. Lloyd Parker" had been the newspaper caption.

The front door made a clicking sound and Ellen Parker opened it. Jericho was directly behind her, then inside before the door could close in his face. She gave him a startled look and hurried up the stairway to the second floor. Jericho was behind her and he could sense her sudden panic. She almost ran along the second-floor hallway to the apartment in the rear. The door was opening and a man in a seersucker robe was smiling at her—and the man with the red beard was directly behind her.

There was a moment of confusion.

"Ward!" Ellen Parker cried out.

She was pushed hard from behind, then she and Wardell Lewis and Jericho all wound up inside the apartment. The door was closed and Jericho was leaning against it. Lewis, tall, with longish dark hair and a mod mustache, was naked under the seersucker robe. He looked around, obviously frightened, for a weapon.

"He followed me in," Ellen Parker said in a husky voice.

The world is full of black tales about the city and its violences. Women are attacked and robbed in the hallways of their apartment houses; drug addicts steal, even kill, for the price of a fix. It would come like this, they were thinking—unexpected, catching them totally unprepared.

Jericho took off his rain hat and shook the water out of it. He tossed it onto a chair near the door.

Lewis' eyes widened. He was the man-about-town, the gossip hunter, the man who knew everyone. "You're John Jericho, the painter!" he said.

"I'm John Jericho, friend of Fay Martin's," Jericho said. "We'll have a talk and I hope for your sake you'll answer questions."

"What do you mean by breaking in this way?" Lewis demanded.

"I wanted to catch you two together," Jericho said. "Fay told me about you. I wanted to make sure for myself. Now I'm going to get the truth about last night if I have to scrape you out of your shells."

Lewis walked over to a table in the center of the room and took a cigarette from a lacquered box. It was a cluttered room, every inch of the wall space covered with photographs of celebrated people in society, politics, and show business, all autographed to Wardell Lewis. Lewis held a table lighter to his cigarette with an unsteady hand.

"If you were a friend of Parker's secretary," he said, "I can understand why you're so steamed up. But so help me, I'm going to have you arrested for breaking and entering, and for threatening us with violence."

Jericho's pale eyes were fixed on the woman who was standing behind a chair, gripping it to support herself. He appeared not to have heard Lewis. Fay had been right—she was beautiful. What, he wondered, did she see in a creep like Lewis?

"Fay had found out about you and Lewis," Jericho said to her. "But she was willing to do anything to keep your husband from finding out that you were having an affair with this clown and feeding him information that could hurt your husband. You didn't need to kill Fay."

Ellen Parker's eyes were wide with fright. "That bomb wasn't meant for Fay, God help her," she said. "It was meant for me!"

"Keep still, Ellen," Lewis said. "This man is your enemy."

"What makes you think the bomb was meant for you, Mrs. Parker?" Jericho asked.

"Because I was meant to go to the car," she said. She looked as if her legs were about to fold under her. She clung to the chair.

"Take it slowly from the beginning," Jericho said. He told himself he had an ear for the truth. Lewis was the kind of man who'd grown up saying, "I didn't do it!"—but Ellen Parker was something else again. She was two-timing her husband, betraying his secrets, but she obviously believed what she had just said. She believed the bomb had been meant for her.

"It was at the White Hills Community Center, just before last night's debate was about to begin," Ellen Parker said. "I had left

my seat to go to the powder room. When I came back there was an envelope on my seat. In it was a set of car keys and a scribbled note saying my husband wanted me to get an envelope he'd left in the glove compartment of his car. He was up on the speaker's stand on the stage. He smiled and waved at me. I waved back, indicating I'd do what he asked—waved back with the note."

"Was the note in your husband's handwriting?"

"No. I thought one of his staff had written it. I was just starting to edge my way out of the row of seats when Fay appeared. She asked me if anything was wrong, because they were just about to start. I told her Lloyd needed something from the car and she said she'd get it. I—I was glad not to have to go, so I gave her the keys and the note."

"Which were blown up in the car with her," Lewis said. "Ellen can't prove a word of what she's saying and he denied he asked anyone to get anything."

"He?"

"Parker, for God's sake. Who else? Of course he denies it—he meant to kill Ellen!"

"Why?"

"Because he'd found out about us, why else?"

"I don't dare go home," Ellen Parker said, her voice shaking. "The police were there all last night—to protect him. But once they're gone he may try again."

"The man's turned into a homicidal maniac," Lewis said. "Ellen and I are going to have to get protection from the police."

"Were you at the Community Center in White Hills last night, Lewis?" Jericho asked.

"Of course I was there," Lewis said. "I'm covering the campaign, as you know if you read the papers."

Jericho glanced at Ellen Parker. "And how you're covering the campaign!" he said. "A man who goes berserk and tries to kill his wife for an infidelity doesn't usually leave out the wife's lover. Well, maybe Parker's saving you for dessert."

"You think it's something to joke about?" Lewis said. "I've had about enough of this." He bent down and opened the drawer of the table behind which he was standing. His hand didn't get out of the drawer with the revolver—Jericho moved too fast. His left hand grabbed Lewis' right wrist and brought it down on the edge of the table. The gun fell noiselessly to the rug. Jericho's right hand swung to Lewis' jaw. The columnist's head snapped back

and he collapsed on the rug without a sound.

Ellen Parker didn't move from her place behind the chair, still clutching it for support. Her eyes, wide with fear, were fixed on Jericho, as if she expected to be next. He was moving toward her and she obviously wanted to scream, but couldn't. He took her arm gently.

"There are things I need to know about your husband," he said. "Could we go somewhere else to talk—somewhere that smells less of treachery?"

She made no move to go to Lewis, but asked, "Is he hurt?"

"He will have a severe headache—I hope," Jericho said.

They sat together in a corner booth in a little restaurant a couple of blocks from Lewis' apartment. The rain had let up and they had walked there, Ellen Parker in a kind of trance. Jericho ordered coffee, with brandy to lace it. He leaned back in the booth, watching her, waiting for her to speak. There was something unexpectedly vulnerable about her. She wasn't the kind of woman he had expected.

"I've destroyed myself," she said finally, not looking at Jericho. "It's always been that way. I have always destroyed everything that has been good in my life."

"Your marriage?" he asked quietly.

"Since I was a little girl I've always been afraid that people only liked me because I was so rich. I never believed that any man really wanted me for myself. I always tested them and tested them until I drove them away. Then Lloyd Parker came into my life and for the first time I really believed I was loved and wanted for myself, that my money didn't have anything to do with how he felt about me. For the first time in my life I was happy, without doubts, without fears."

"What changed it?"

"This venture into politics," she said, drawing a deep breath. "You can't get elected dog catcher these days, Mr. Jericho, without spending a great deal of money. Lloyd asked me for a great deal of money and I gave it to him gladly, happily. Then, as soon as I did, he seemed to lose interest in me. Our love life came to an end. I told myself it was because he was working fourteen-eighteen hours a day. But the old doubts, the bitter certainty that it was only my money he wanted, took charge again. I guess I went a little crazy. I went out on the town looking for a man, any man,

who'd find me attractive without knowing I was rich, rich, rich. It was Ward Lewis who picked me up and restored my ego."

"Lewis, who knew who you were from the first moment he laid eyes on you, knew you were rich, rich, rich, and who planned to use you to help the Molloy crowd."

"I wanted to hurt Lloyd," she said, her lips trembling. "I wanted revenge. And—and I hated myself."

"Good for you," Jericho said.

"Last night, when Lloyd told me that he knew about Ward and me, I—"

"He *knew*?" Jericho sat up straight.

"He told me while we were driving out to White Hills. There'd been an anonymous letter. He'd checked on me and found out it was true. I knew how much it hurt him and I was glad for a moment. But he was wonderful about it. He took the blame, admitted he'd neglected me, begged me to give him another chance. I almost began to believe in him again."

"Why do you suppose he told you he knew if he was planning to kill you?" Jericho asked.

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "So I'd know, at the last moment when the bomb went off, why I was dying."

"That makes him into some kind of monster," Jericho said.

Ellen Parker closed her eyes. "God help me," she said.

The receptionist in the brokerage offices of Sheftel & Parker was not cordial.

"I'm afraid Mr. Parker can't see you today, Mr. Jericho. If you've heard the news—"

"Give him this note," Jericho said. "I think he'll see me."

Jericho felt out of place in the paneled waiting room with its rich green-leather furnishings. His corduroy jacket and turtlenecked shirt were altogether too casual for this palace of wealth. There was another out-of-place man sitting in one of the big chairs across the room. Jericho's artist's eyes picked up details that might have escaped others. A slight bulge at the other man's waistline spelled gun. Cop, Jericho thought. The police weren't risking another attempt on Parker's life.

The receptionist, looking mildly surprised, reappeared. "Mr. Parker will see you," she said.

She led Jericho into an inner room. He was aware that the waiting man had risen and was following him. In the inner room

another out-of-place man faced him. He showed a police shield.

"Mr. Parker doesn't know you, Mr. Jericho. Under the circumstances you'll understand why we must make sure you're not armed."

Jericho raised his arms languidly. The man behind tapped Jericho over. There was a moment of tension when he felt a bulge in the pocket of the corduroy coat. It turned out to be Jericho's pipe.

Lloyd Parker was about six feet tall, with soft, curly brown hair. He had a square jaw, and the crow's-feet at the corners of his brown eyes suggested a man of good humor. But those eyes were red-rimmed, probably from lack of sleep. He looked like a man fighting exhaustion. This had been Fay's kind of man, Jericho thought: gentle, undemanding, considerate. Most people would instinctively like Lloyd Parker under normal circumstances. Now he was undermined by tensions and anxiety. He stood in front of his big flat-topped desk, leaning against it.

"Your note, Mr. Jericho, tells me that you were a friend of Fay's, which is why I agreed to see you. It also says that you know where my wife is. Why should you think that would interest me?"

"Aren't you wondering if she's gone back to Wardell Lewis?"

A muscle rippled along Parker's jawline. "Just what, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"Oh, come, Mr. Parker, let's not waste time with games. I've just been talking to your wife. I knew about the affair from Fay."

"Fay? Fay knew?"

"Fay knew and was prepared to do anything to keep you from finding out about it. But you did find out."

Parker's face hardened. "What do you want of me, Mr. Jericho?"

"I want to ask you a question before I call in those cops out there and charge you with the murder of Fay Martin and the intention to murder your wife."

Parker's mouth dropped and he gasped for air like a landed fish. "You're out of your mind!" he whispered.

"I think not." Jericho's voice was matter-of-fact. "Your wife got your instructions to go to the car, where a bomb was waiting for her. By mischance Fay offered to do the errand for her. I said in my note that I know where your wife is. I do. She's not with Lewis, if that matters to you. But it must be obvious to you that she won't see you or go back home with you. She's afraid you might try again."

"This is sheer madness!" Parker said. "I don't want my wife dead. I love her. There's nothing in the world that matters to me without her. I had nothing to do with the bomb, I sent no message asking her to go to the car, I had just been pleading with her to give our marriage a second chance."

"When did you tell Fay she could stop looking for the person who was feeding Wardell Lewis with information about you?"

"Last night, just a little while before the debate was to begin. I told her the truth—that I'd found out Ellen was having an affair with Lewis, which explained his source of information."

"She wasn't shocked, Parker. She had told me earlier in the day about the affair. She was, as I told you, prepared to do anything to keep you from knowing."

"She told me that. I was grateful, but I explained to her that Ellen was all that mattered to me, that I'd do anything to get her back."

Jericho's eyes wandered toward a small bar in the corner of the office. "Do you mind if I pour myself a drink?"

"Yes, I mind!" Parker said. "Does Ellen really think I tried to kill her?"

"She's sure of it," Jericho said. He went over to the bar and poured himself a bourbon. He looked at Parker and raised his glass. "Maybe I can persuade her that she's wrong."

"But you just threatened to—"

"I know," Jericho said. "You have an extraordinary effect on women, Parker. One of them runs away from you and into the arms of a heel because she thinks you don't love her enough. Another gives up being a woman for ten years just to breathe the same air that you do. But I don't suppose Fay ever gave up hope that some day, somehow, you might be more than that to her."

"Poor Fay."

"Yes, poor Fay," Jericho said. "It could have been this way, Parker. When she found out about your wife's affair with Lewis she wanted to save you the hurt. Your wife's death might be a terrible blow to you, but having your male ego shattered would be even worse. I think she had already planned a way when she talked to me at lunch yesterday. Maybe she hoped I'd come up with a better answer, but unfortunately I didn't."

"So it was she, it was Fay who rigged the bomb in your car. Keys? There was a spare set which you'd put 'in a safe place' that you no longer could remember. Fay knew. Your secretary, Parker,

your devoted, loving secretary knew. Your wife might not know your 'safe place,' or the size of your collar, or how you liked your eggs, but Fay knew; she knew everything there was to know about you and she cherished the knowledge."

"It doesn't make sense," Parker said, his voice shaken. "How would *she* know how to rig a bomb? Fay? Impossible!"

"Quite possible," Jericho said. "There's an odd fact I know about her that you'd have no reason to know. When I first met Fay in Paris ten or twelve years ago she was a model. I am a painter. She was also a member of a wild young revolutionary group that was constantly demonstrating, bombing, and burning. Their aim was to get rid of General de Gaulle. They were trained by experienced people. She would know how to make a simple bomb.

"I met her, she modeled for me, we fell in love in a sort of way, and for a good many months she forgot about being a Mata Hari. When we parted she came back here and went to work for you. But she had the knowledge about explosives."

"And you say she meant to kill Ellen?"

"I think so. She would kill Ellen and at the same time improve your election prospects, because Molloy and his crowd would be suspected. She prepared the note that would send your wife out to the car and left it on her seat. It must have been after she'd done that you told her you knew. More important—more devastating to Fay—you made it clear that Ellen was still all that mattered to you. That there'd be no future for Fay even if Ellen died. If Ellen was the only one you wanted, poor defeated Fay would make certain you had her. She must have hurried to retrieve the note and the keys. But Ellen already had them."

"Good God."

Jericho looked at his empty glass. "So she volunteered to run the errand for Ellen."

"Knowing the bomb was in the car?"

"Maybe she thought she could deactivate it. Maybe, in that brief trip to the parking lot she decided to take it as a way out. Perhaps she thought she would be doing you a last service. The bomb would at least end Molloy's chances of defeating you in the election."

"Can you prove this?"

"Not one word of it," Jericho said. He turned back to the bar and poured himself another drink. "But I might persuade your wife that it's true. Care to come with me and help me try?"

Ruth Rendell

Venus's-Flytrap

Ruth Rendell's "Venus's-Flytrap," shrewdly and subtly clued, is a thoroughly British crime story—that is to say, we can't imagine it having been written by an American, a German, an Italian—by anyone other than an English writer.

Ruth Rendell's crime novel, ONE ACROSS, TWO DOWN, was judged one of the best mysteries published in the United States in 1971. A quotation from one of the reviews of the book also describes this short story: "A wickedly ironic, minutely observed, psychologically sound fable of crime and punishment . . ."

As soon as Daphne had taken off her hat and put it on Merle's bed, Merle picked it up and rammed it on her own yellow curls. It was a red felt hat and by chance it matched Merle's red dress.

"It's a funny thing, dear," said Merle, looking at herself in the dressing-table mirror, "but anyone seeing us two—any outsider, I mean—would never think that I was the single one and you'd had all those husbands and children."

"I only had two husbands and three children," said Daphne.

"You know what I mean," said Merle, and Daphne, standing beside her friend, had to admit she did. Merle was so big, so pink and overflowing and female, while she—well, she had given up pretending she was anything but a little dried-up widow, 70 years old and looking every day of it.

Merle took off the hat and placed it beside the doll whose yellow satin skirts concealed Merle's nightgown and bag of hair rollers. "I'll show you the flat and then we'll have a sherry and rest our feet. I got some of that walnut-brown. You see I haven't forgotten your tastes even after forty years."

Daphne didn't say it was dry sherry she had then and still preferred. She trotted meekly after Merle. She was just beginning to

be aware of the intense heat. Clouds of warmth seemed to breathe out of the embossed wallpaper and up through the lush furry carpets.

"I really am thrilled about you coming to live in this block, dear," said Merle. "This is my little spare room. I like to think I can put up a friend if I want. Not that many of them come. Between you and me, dear, people rather resent my having done so well for myself and all on my own initiative. People are so mean-spirited—I've noticed that as I've got older. That's why I was so thrilled when you agreed to come here. I mean, when *someone* took my advice."

"You've made it all very nice," said Daphne.

"Well, I always say the flat had the potential and I had the taste. Of course, yours is much smaller and frankly I wouldn't say it lends itself to a very ambitious décor. In your place, the first thing I'd do is have central heating put in."

"I expect I will if I can afford it."

"You know, Daphne, there are some things we owe it to ourselves to afford. But you know your own business best and I wouldn't dream of interfering. If the cold gets you down you're welcome to come up here at any time. *Any* time, I mean that. Now this is my drawing room, my *pièce de résistance*."

Merle opened the door with the air of a girl lifting the lid of a jewel case that holds a lover's gift.

"What a lot of plants," said Daphne faintly.

"I was always mad about plants. My first business venture was a florist's shop. I could have made a little gold mine out of it if my partner hadn't been so wickedly vindictive. She was determined to oust me from the first. D'you like my suite? I had it completely redone in oyster satin last year and I do think it's a success."

The atmosphere was that of a hothouse. The chairs, the sofa, the lamps, the little piecrust tables with their loads of bibelots, were islanded in the center of the large room. No; not an island perhaps, Daphne thought, but a clearing in a tropical jungle. Shelves, window sills, white troughs on white wrought-iron legs, were burgeoned with lush trailing growth—green, glossy, frondy, all immobile and all giving forth a strange scent.

"They take up all my time. It's not just the watering and watching the temperature and so on. Plants know when you love them. They only flourish in an atmosphere of love. I honestly don't believe you'd find a better specimen of an *opuntia* in London than

mine. I'm particularly proud of the *peperomias* and the *xygocacti* too. Of course, I suppose you've seen them growing in their natural habitat with all your mad rushing around those foreign places."

"We were mostly in Stockholm and New York, Merle."

"Oh, were you? So many years went by when you never bothered to write to me that I really couldn't keep pace. I thought about you a lot, of course. I want you to know you really had my sympathy, moving all the time and that awful divorce from what's-his-name, and babies to cope with, and then getting married again and everything. I used to feel how sad it was that I'd made so much out of my life while you—what's the matter?"

"That plant, Merle. It moved!"

"That's because you touched it. When you touch one of its mouths it closes up. It's called *Dionaea Muscipula*."

The plant stood alone in a majolica pot within an elaborate white stand. It looked very healthy. It had delicate shiny leaves and from its heart grew five red-gold blossoms. As Daphne peered more closely she saw that these resembled mouths, just as Merle had put it, far more than flowers—whiskery mouths, soft and ripe and luscious. One of these was now closed.

"Doesn't it have a common name?"

"Of course it does. Venus's-flytrap. *Muscipula* means fly eater, dear."

"Whatever *do* you mean?"

"It eats flies. I've been trying to grow one for years. I was absolutely thrilled when I succeeded."

"Yes, but what d'you mean, it eats flies? It's not an animal."

"It is in a way, dear. The trouble is there aren't many flies here. I feed it on little bits of meat. You've gone rather pale, Daphne. Have you got a headache? We'll have our sherry now and then I'll see if I can catch a fly and you can see it eat it up."

"I'd really much rather not, Merle," said Daphne, backing away from the plant. "I don't want to hurt your feelings but I don't—well, I don't like the idea of catching free, live things and feeding them to—that."

"Free, live things? We're talking about flies." Merle, large and perfumed, grabbed Daphne's arm and pulled her away. Merle's dress was of red chiffon with trailing sleeves and her fingernails matched it. "The trouble with you," said Merle, "is that you're a mass of nerves and you're much worse now than you were when

we were girls. I thank God every day of my life I don't know what it is to be neurotic. Here you are, your sherry. I've put it in a big glass to buck you up. I'm going to make it my business to look after you, Daphne. You don't know anybody else in London, do you?"

"Hardly anybody," said Daphne, sitting down where she couldn't see the Flytrap. "My boys are in the States and my daughter's in Scotland."

"Well, you must come up here every day. No, you won't be intruding. When I first knew you were definitely coming, I said to myself, I'm going to see to it that Daphne isn't lonely. But don't imagine you'll get on with the other tenants in this block. Those of them who aren't standoffish snobs are—well, not the sort of people you'd want to know. But we won't talk about them. We'll talk about us. Unless, of course, you feel your past has been too painful to talk about?"

"I wouldn't quite say—"

"No, you won't care to rake up unpleasant memories. I'll just put a drop more sherry in your glass and then I'll tell you all about my last venture, my agency."

Daphne rested her head against a cushion, brushed away an ivy frond, and prepared to listen.

Merle was scraping slivers of meat from a piece of fillet steak. She was all in diaphanous gold today, an amber chain around her neck, the finery half covered by a frilly apron.

"I used to do that for my babies when they first went on solids," said Daphne.

"Babies, babies. You're always talking about your babies. You've been up here every day for three weeks now and I don't think you've once missed the opportunity to mention your babies and your men. Oh, I'm sorry, dear, I don't mean to upset you, but one really does get so weary of women like you talking about that side of life as if one had actually *missed* something."

"Why are you scraping that meat, Merle?"

"To feed my little Venus. That's her breakfast. Come along. I've got a fly I caught under a sherry glass but I couldn't catch more than one."

The fly was crawling up the inside of the glass, but when Merle approached it, it began to buzz frenziedly against the transparent dome of its prison. Daphne turned her back. She went to the win-

dow, the huge plant-filled bay window, and looked out, pretending to be interested in the view. She heard the scrape of glass and a triumphant gasp from Merle. Then Merle began talking to the plant in a gentle, maternal voice.

"This really is a wonderful outlook," said Daphne brightly. "You can see for miles."

Merle said, "*C'est Venus toute entiere a sa proie attachée.*"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You never were any good at languages, dear. Oh, don't pretend you're so mad about that view. You're just being absurdly sensitive about what really amounts to *gardening*. I can't bear that sort of dishonesty. I've finished now, anyway. She's had her breakfast and all her mouths are shut. Who are you waving to?"

"A rather nice young couple who live in the next flat to me."

"Well, please don't." Merle looked down and then drew herself up, all golden pleats and stiff golden curls. "You couldn't know, dear, but those two people are the very end. For one thing, they're not married, I'm sure of that. Of course, that's no business of mine. What is my business is that they've been keeping a dog here—look, that spaniel thing—and it's strictly against the rules to keep animals in these flats."

"What about your Flytrap?"

"Oh, don't be silly! As I was saying, they keep that dog and let it foul the garden. I wrote to the managing agents, but those agents are so lax—they've no respect for me because I'm a single woman, I suppose. But I wrote again the day before yesterday and now I understand they're definitely going to be turned out."

Forty feet below the window, in the parking space between the block and the garden, the boy who wore blue jeans and a leather jacket picked up his dog and placed it on the rear seat of a rather battered car. His companion, a girl with waist-length hair, got into the passenger seat, but the boy hesitated. As Merle brought her face close to the glass, he looked up and raised two wide-splayed fingers.

"Oaf!" said Merle. "The only thing to do with people like that is to ignore them. Can you imagine it, he lets that dog of his foul a really beautiful specimen of *cryptomeria japonica*. Let's forget him and have a nice cup of coffee."

"Merle, how long will those flowers last on that Venus thing of yours? I mean, they'll soon die anyway, won't they?"

"No, they won't. They'll last for ages. You know, Daphne, fond

as I am of you, I wouldn't leave you alone in this flat for anything. You've a personal hatred of my *muscipula*. You'd like to destroy it."

"I'll put the coffee on," said Daphne.

Merle phoned for a taxi. Then she put her little red address book with all the phone numbers in it into her scarlet patent-leather handbag along with her lipstick, her gold compact, her keys, her check book, and four five-pound notes.

"We could have walked," said Daphne.

"No, we couldn't, dear. When I have a day at the shops I like to feel fresh. I don't want to half kill myself walking there. It's not the cost that's worrying you, is it? Because you know I'll pay. I appreciate the difference between our incomes, Daphne, and if I don't harp on it it's only because I try to be tactful. I want to buy you something, something really nice to wear. It seems such a wicked shame to me those men of yours didn't see to it you were well provided for."

"I've got quite enough clothes, Merle."

"Yes, but all gray and black. The only bright thing you've got is that red hat and you've stopped wearing that."

"I'm old, Merle dear. I don't want to get myself up in bright colors, I've had my life."

"Well, I haven't had mine! I mean, I—" Merle bit her lip, getting scarlet lipstick on her teeth.

She walked across the room, picked her ocelot coat off the back of the sofa, and paused in front of the Flytrap. Its soft, flame-colored mouths were open. She tickled them with her fingertips and they snapped shut. Merle giggled. "You know what you remind me of, Daphne? A fly. That's just what you look like in your gray coat and that funny bit of veil on your hat. A *fly*."

"There's the taxi," said Daphne.

It deposited them outside a large overheated store. Merle dragged Daphne through the jewelry department, the perfumery, past revolving stands with belts on them, past plastic mannequins in lingerie. They went up in the elevators. Merle bought a dress, orange chiffon with sequins all over the skirt.

They went down in the elevator and into the next store. Merle bought face bracer and eau de toilette and a gilt choker. They went up on the escalator. Merle bought a belt of brass links and tried to buy Daphne a green and blue silk scarf. Daphne con-

sented at last to be presented with a pair of stockings, elastic support ones for her veins.

"Now we'll have lunch on the roof garden," said Merle.

"I should like a cup of tea."

"And I'll have a large sherry. But first I must freshen up. I'm dying to spend a penny and do my face."

They queued with their pennies. The Ladies Room had green-marble dressing tables with mirrors all down one side and wash-basins down the other. Daphne sat down. Her feet had begun to swell. There were 20 or 30 other women in the room, doing their faces, combing their hair, replacing false eyelashes.

Merle put her scarlet handbag down on a free bit of green marble. She washed her hands, went over and helped herself to a gush of Calèche from the scent-squirting machine, came back, opening and shutting her coat to fan herself. It was even hotter than in her flat.

She sat down and drew her chair to the mirror.

"Where's my handbag?" Merle screamed. "I left my handbag right here! Someone's stolen my handbag. Daphne, Daphne, someone's stolen my handbag!"

The oyster satin sofa sagged under Merle's weight. Daphne smoothed back the golden curls and put another pad of cotton soaked in cologne on Merle's red corrugated forehead.

"Bit better now?" asked Daphne.

"I'm quite all right. I'm not one of your neurotic women to get into a state over a thing like that. Thank God, I left a spare key with the porter."

"You'll have to have both locks changed, Merle."

"Of course I will eventually. I'll see to it next week. Nobody can get in here, can they? And they don't know who I am. I mean, they don't know whose keys they've got."

"They've got your handbag."

"Daphne dear, I do wish you wouldn't keep stating the obvious. I *know* they've got my handbag. The point is, there was nothing in my handbag to show who I am."

"There was your check book with your name on it."

"My name, dear, in case it's escaped your notice, is M. Smith. Just the initial, and no address. I haven't gone about changing it all my life like you." Merle sat up and took a gulp of walnut-brown sherry.

"The store manager was charming, wasn't he, and the police? I daresay they'll find it, you know. It's a most distinctive handbag, not like that great black thing you cart about with you. My little red one could have gone inside yours. I wish I'd thought to put it there."

"I wish you had," said Daphne.

Daphne's phone rang. It was half-past nine and she was finishing her breakfast, sitting in front of her little electric fire.

Merle sounded very excited. "What do you think? Isn't it marvellous? The store manager's just phoned to say they've found my bag. Well, it wasn't him, it was his secretary, a stupid-sounding woman with one of those put-on accents. However, that's no concern of mine. They found my bag fallen behind a radiator in that Ladies Room. Isn't it an absolute miracle? Of course, the money was gone, but my check book was there and the keys. I'm very glad I didn't take your advice and change those locks yesterday. It never does to act on impulse, Daphne."

"No, I suppose not."

"I've arranged to go down and get my bag at eleven. As soon as I ring off I'm going to phone for a taxi and I want you to come with me, dear. I'll have a quick bath and see to my plants—I've managed to catch a bluebottle for Venus—and then the taxi will be here."

"I'm afraid I can't come," said Daphne.

"Why on earth not?"

Daphne hesitated. Then she said, "I said I hardly know anybody in London and that's true. But I do know this one man, this—well, he was a friend of my second husband and he's a widower now and he's coming to have lunch with me, Merle. He's coming at noon and I must be here to see to things."

"A man?" said Merle. "Another man?"

"I'll look out for your taxi and when I see you come back I'll just pop up and hear all about it, shall I? I'm sorry I can't—"

"Sorry? Sorry for what? I can get my handbag by myself. I'm quite used to standing on my own feet, thank you." The receiver went down with a crash.

Merle had a bath and put on the orange dress. It was rather showy for day wear, with its sequins and its fringes, but she could never bear to have a new dress and not wear it at once. The ocelot coat would cover most of it. She watered the *peperomias* and

painted a little leaf gloss on the ivy. The bluebottle had died in the night, but *dionaea muscipula* didn't seem to mind. She opened her orange, strandy mouths for Merle and devoured the dead bluebottle along with the shreds of fillet steak.

Merle put on her cream silk turban and a long scarf of flame-colored silk. Her spare second-lock key was where she always kept it, underneath the *sanseveria* pot. She double-locked the door and then the taxi took her to the store.

Merle sailed into the manager's office and when the manager told her he had no secretary, had never had anyone phone her flat, and had certainly not found her handbag, she deflated like a fat orange balloon into which someone has stuck a pin.

"You've been the victim of a hoax, Miss Smith."

Merle pulled herself together. She could always do that—she had superb control. No, she didn't want aspirins or brandy or policemen or any of the other aids to quietude offered by the manager. After she had told him he didn't know his job, that if there was a conspiracy against her—as she was sure there must be—he was in it, she floundered down the stairs and flapped her mouth and her arms for a taxi.

When she got home the first thing that struck her as strange was that the door was only single-locked. She could have sworn she had double-locked it, but no doubt her memory was playing tricks and no wonder, the shock she had had. There was a little bit of earth on the hall carpet. Merle didn't like that—earth on her gold Wilton. Inside her ocelot she was sweating. She took off her coat and opened the drawing-room door.

Daphne saw the taxi arrive and Merle bounce out of it, like an orange orchid springing from a black bandbox. Merle looked wild with excitement, her turban all askew. Daphne smiled to herself and shook her head. She set the table and finished making the salad that she knew her friend would like with his lunch and then went upstairs to see Merle.

There was a mirror on each landing. Daphne was so small and thin that she didn't puff much when she had to climb stairs. As she came to the top of each flight she saw a little gray woman trotting to meet her, a woman with smooth white hair and large, rather diffident eyes, who wore a gray wool dress partly covered by a cloudy stole of lace.

She smiled at her reflection. She was old now, but she had had

her moments—her joys, her gratifications, her intense pleasures. And soon there was to be a new pleasure, a confrontation she had looked forward to for weeks. Who could tell what would come of it?

With a last smile at her gray and fluttery image, Daphne gently pushed open the unlocked door of Merle's flat.

In the Garden of Eden, the green paradisaal bower, someone had dropped a bomb. No, they couldn't have done that, for the ceiling was still there and the carpet and the oyster satin furniture, torn now and plastered all over with earth.

Every plant had been broken and torn apart. Leaves lay scattered in heaps like the leaves of autumn, only these were green, succulent, bruised. In the rape of the room, in the midst of ripped foliage, stems bleeding sap, and shards of china lay the Venus's flytrap, its roots wrenched from their pot and its mouths closed forever.

Merle tried to scream but the noise came out only as a gurgle, the agonized gasp of a scream in a nightmare. She fell on her knees and crawled about. Choking and muttering, she scrabbled in the earth, and picking up torn leaves tried to piece them together like bits of a jigsaw puzzle. She crouched over the Venus's Flytrap and nursed it in her hands, keening and swaying to and fro.

She didn't hear the door click shut. It was a long time before she realized Daphne was standing over her, silent, looking down. Merle lifted her red streaming face. Daphne had her hand over her mouth, the hand with the two wedding rings on it. Merle thought Daphne must be covering her mouth to stop herself from laughing—laughing out loud.

Slowly, heavily, Merle got up. Her long orange scarf was in her hands, stretched taut, twisting, twisting. She was surprised how steady her voice was, how level and sane.

"You did it," she said. "You did it. You stole my handbag and took my keys and got me out of here and came in and did all this."

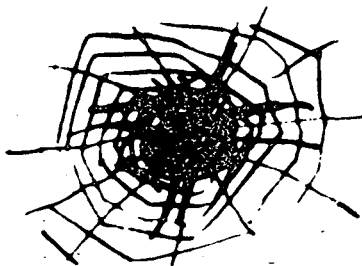
Daphne quivered and shook her head.

"You were so jealous! You'd had nothing, but I had success and happiness and love." Merle's voice went up and the scarf with it. "How you hated me, hated, hated! Hate, hate, poisonous, jealous hate!"

Huge and red and frondy, she descended on Daphne, engulfing her with musky orange petals, twisting the scarf round the frail insect neck, devouring the fly until the fly quivered into stillness . . .

An elderly man in a black Homburg hat crossed the forecourt and went up the steps, a bunch of flowers in his hand.

The boy in the leather jacket took no notice of him. He brushed earth and bits of leaf off his hands and said to the girl with the long hair, "Revenge is sweet." Then he tossed the scarlet handbag that the girl had stolen in the Ladies Room into the back of the car, and he and the girl and the dog got in and drove away.



Nedra Tyre

Locks Won't Keep You Out

"You're not interested in valuables. What you're after is my life" . . .

Leave me alone.

Terror of you paralyzes me, nails me to the threshold. My hands hesitate to open a door. I'm afraid you're on the other side.

I can't sleep. After short troubled naps I wake with the sensation you've been hovering over me. These last few days I've convinced myself it's safe to walk only when the sun is shining so I'll be warned of your presence by your shadow.

I don't go to museums any more. They have too many dark and secluded nooks where you could find me.

My concert tickets go unused; in the darkened auditorium when the music reaches a crescendo you could easily crush out my life while my shouts of protest are drowned by the percussion instruments.

My mail goes unanswered and I refuse invitations. I've lied out of attending committee meetings, pretending that minor illnesses keep me from dinners and parties.

I've never been a coward—what had to be faced I faced. Yet I can't face your malice.

Perhaps you're enraged because I have ignored you. No, ignored is too strong a word. Disdained would be a more accurate way of putting it. I suppose I do have some of Aunt Carrie's arrogance. She wasn't a snob. She just had a way of walking straight past some people without seeing them—she didn't seem to know they were there. I honestly didn't know you were there. I couldn't believe it when you began to threaten me. When I realized your intentions were deadly, that it was my life you were after, I refused to believe it. I called myself an imaginative fool.

Why I despise you most of all—rather, why I despise my fear of you most of all—is that my fear makes me oblivious of everything

else. I don't even notice the weather. I have loved weather, no matter what form it takes. Its ridiculous caprices that can begin a morning at 20 degrees and a few hours later have the thermometer soaring to summer heat—those caprices have delighted me. Hot. Cold. No extreme mattered. I responded to it all with joy.

Now I don't pay any attention to the weather, and since I don't notice its vagaries the weather has turned into my enemy. I find myself shivering, not having put on warm enough clothing. I plunge into rain without an umbrella or sink ankle-deep in puddles without my boots.

One day my fear of you made me panic and I telephoned the police for protection. My damsel-in-distress, ladylike trills had an immediate effect. Within minutes a policeman arrived at my door.

But I had no crime to report, only your vague threats. I began to apologize for having summoned the policeman on a fool's errand. Immediately he reassured me. I had reason to be afraid, he insisted, as he looked around at the paintings and the silver. He hoped I had good locks. And surely I wasn't ever foolish enough to let anyone enter whom I didn't know.

If only I could tempt you with the things I've accumulated, appease you with a minor Gauguin or a George III silver beaker.

The policeman went around appraising the security, suggesting a stronger lock here and there.

Locks won't keep you out. You're not interested in valuables. What you're after is my life. I'm positive of that. Yet never before have I felt the inevitability of anything; life has always offered many paths and one could easily retreat from a path already begun. Trips to be taken always held as many choices as there were air routes and if one residence didn't prove satisfactory there were dozens of houses and apartments—a planetful of locations—to select from. A jewel could be recut and reset and a joyless love affair ended. To be pleased was only a matter of making another and wiser choice.

But there is no choice now.

The paths have all converged and they lead straight to you. They lead to my death from you.

If only these last days were free of dread and the short time remaining to me were not ruined by constant apprehension. I should have thought that when one knows she is looking on something for the last time it would be with a heightened response. Flowers are blooming—roses and lilies-of-the-valley are bursting

with beauty and fragrance. The shelves are heavy with books I've promised myself the pleasure of reading again.

But the flowers might as well be rank and the books printed in Sanskrit for all the delight they will ever give me.

It isn't as if I haven't made preparations for death. My last will and testament has been sensibly drawn. My daughter is well provided for; *objets d'art* are to go to museums; and there are legacies and keepsakes for my friends.

I detest myself for this cowardly preoccupation with my annihilation. Newspapers and TV and the radio should have hardened us all to death—hundreds dashed to death in tornadoes shown on the TV shortly before dinner, thousands demolished in a tidal wave in the paper read with the morning coffee, unnumbered victims crushed in earthquakes announced on the radio as one sips a cocktail before lunch.

Death and danger are everywhere and much closer home than the announced tragedy delivered with the morning paper along with the advertisements of month-end clearance sales or reported on TV between the detergent commercials. There can be a car out of control only a block away or a fire can devour a house on the next street.

But all those tragedies are dealt by destiny impersonally and without malice.

There's nothing impersonal in your malice toward me.

Please—I beg you—leave me alone. I was a dutiful child. I obeyed my parents. I was polite to my elders. I was a loving wife and a conscientious mother. I've been committed to good causes.

Only listen to that—you have me whining—I've been degraded by you. I'm trying to cash in my chits of good behavior. I'm sniveling for mercy, sucking up to you for leniency.

The telephone is ringing. I'm not going to answer it. I know it's you. I know what you'll say.

The ringing goes on and on and on. Finally it stops. After a while there's a harsh knock on the door. Then two hands are pounding. The bell works perfectly. Yet the person outside is too excited to use the bell. It can't be you. You're much too sneaking to knock and ask for admission.

I open the door and my daughter is standing outside. I am always amazed by her beauty and her lack of knowledge of it or at least of her refusal to take advantage of it. How lovely to have a child like her.

"Mama," she says, "what on earth's the matter?" Not even a frown of worry can disturb her beauty. "I telephoned and there was no answer and suddenly I realized that it's been a week since you've called. I know how busy you are but you've never gone this long before without phoning me. Darling, come home with me now. It would be such a pleasure to have you. Please?"

I love my daughter and her husband and her children, but I can't infect their house with my fear. I can't spoil their happiness. I can't have you following me there. I beg off with a promise to come as soon as I can manage.

When she has kissed me and left I begin to work compulsively.

I polish silver. I tidy the broom closet. I arrange pots and pans in neat rows and realign the already regimented rows of canned food on the pantry shelves.

Mollie won't like this. She hates for me to tidy the kitchen or to polish the silver. Again and again she has said she ought to be out working for a woman who needs her more than I do. She says it makes her feel I no longer trust her to do the job I pay her to do.

But I must occupy myself. I must somehow black out my terror of you.

The shelves are in meticulous order and the silver glistens. The kitchen is spotless.

There's nothing else to do.

Yet I must occupy myself.

I can play solitaire.

There's something infinitely soothing in knowing that the cards may all be played one upon the other, black and red in descending order. At least there's a possibility that they may all find their prescribed places.

I don't often win. Still it's possible. And when I do win there's such a feeling of exuberance. Once I even won twice in succession. I wonder how often that has happened. I'm sure the probability of winning twice in succession in solitaire is most unlikely.

I take the cards from the second drawer of the red lacquered desk and then sit down at the fruitwood card table. I like the feel of the cards. As I riffle them they flutter like a bird beating its wings in my hands.

I play the first card.

It's the ace of spades.

Death.

I won't believe it. I refuse to believe it.

Somehow my fear of you has infected the cards.

Yet I know the cards can't respond to my fear. There is no such thing as inanimate objects responding to human moods and emotions. My terror cannot have summoned up the card that signifies death.

Perhaps my fear did infect the cards.

If the mind can influence cards, then I will influence them. I pick the cards up from their various small stacks and shuffle them again. I must concentrate on a good luck card. The nine of hearts or the ten of diamonds—or, best of all, the ace of diamonds.

I shuffle and riffle the cards. Again, against my palms there is that feeling of the heartbeat of a bird or some small caged animal. I distribute the cards and prissily take time to make the seven stacks symmetrical.

I turn the first card face upward.

The ace of spades.

I push the ace of spades from me, then grasp it and try to tear it. It remains intact and blood oozes from the thin cut the card has made on my right forefinger.

I need reassurance—not reassurance from a wise professional or a dear friend but from a very particular source.

The walls of my large apartment seem to contract. I must escape before they crush me.

I go outside and hail a taxi, and as I enter it I repress my fear. I insist to myself that I'm on a lark, a small diversion, something foolish, but forgivable; any bored housewife could understand my action.

When I've ridden several miles I dismiss the taxi and tip the driver lavishly as if he's done me a special favor or service. I have not been let out at my real destination and must walk four blocks to my goal.

Outside there is a sign of a large hand marked like a road map, but its routes are the life line, the heart line, the line of destiny, and beneath it in small letters there is a legend: *Madame Sybil—the Past, Present, and Future.*

I have teased my friends who have come here and have smiled over their insistence that they don't believe a word of what Madame Sybil says; but going to her is fun, like getting a new hairdo or finding an unexpected bargain in an antique shop. But I had no such feeling now. I was here from absolute necessity.

I pushed the bell.

There was a long wait and the door was jerked open.

Madame looked like someone caught unaware. She had the petulance of someone aroused needlessly from sleep. Grease was smeared around her mouth beyond the splotched and spotted lipstick. Her tongue explored her teeth, as if for bits of food, and I realized I must have surprised her at a meal. She had the ruffled, somewhat annoyed air of someone summoned to an emergency; there was nothing about her of a sybil who could foretell the future or divine the past or give me sage counsel on how to act. But with a commanding motion that contradicted her disheveled appearance, she waved me down the hall to a doorway, then swept past me.

In a room cluttered with furniture she squinted against the sun eking through the slats of some dirty and disjointed Venetian blinds, and with theatrical flicks of her wrist she adjusted the blinds so that we were in darkness.

Then from somewhere behind me a thin light wavered and a candle projected unsteady shadows on the walls. There was another flickering of a match and almost immediately I began to smell incense of such stifling intensity that I coughed. Madame slid into a chair across from me at the heavily draped table and said, "Ten dollars." Her voice was as bland and impersonal as that of a checkout clerk at a supermarket counter demanding the amount to be paid for a cart of groceries.

I fumbled in my pocketbook. I shuffled through credit cards and dry-cleaning tickets and at last found some money. A lizard's tongue could not have been as quick as her hand darting for the money and there was a detour into her large bosom to bank the fee before her hands came to rest in her lap.

I waited for her to speak, to ask me why I was here, what I wanted to know. But there was only silence. After a while I was about to question her when she said angrily, "I can't tell you anything."

"I don't understand," I said. "You tell other people things. You've talked to a number of my friends and acquaintances. Last week you told Eloise Smithson she was going to get a legacy."

"I can't tell you anything," she said again, as if I hadn't heard her the first time. "Take your money and leave." Her right hand dived inside her bodice and then my bill sailed across the table and lighted like a crippled moth on the sleeve of my coat. "Take

the money and go." Her voice was shrill.

I did not move. Then she screamed at me. She was like a very poor actress overplaying a scene. Her mouth curled in anger. "Leave this house at once," she ordered.

I left with as much dignity as I could muster. Even as she shrieked at me to leave I got up slowly and smoothed my skirt and tucked the money back into my bag and snapped the fastener and walked down the dim hall with composure, but once I was on the street I began to run.

I thrust people aside. I scrambled onto a bus, then got off. I took another bus in the direction from which I had just come. I was like a spy in a third-rate film who is trying to shake pursuers. I ran down an alley. I lost myself in the crowds of a department store.

I was trying to evade you.

Then I took a taxi home, to be swallowed up by the lobby of the apartment house where I live. Far beyond me, as unapproachable as an astronaut in orbit, was the receptionist behind the shield of a heavy glass partition. Nearer was the bank of elevators. I knew that none of my dodges or detours had worked and that you were in one of the elevators waiting for me.

I dared not risk taking an elevator. I left the elevators and skirted the gigantic plants in their huge cachepots that lined the passage to the stairway. I pulled at the door beneath the discreet sign marked STAIRS and scurried up the steps. I was tempted to stop at each landing to rest but fear of you made me race to my floor and terror forced me to brush so close against the wall of the corridor that paint scaled off onto my sleeve.

I had to stop for breath and I looked through one of a long row of tall windows hung with full thick draperies. I knew you were hiding somewhere in that endless line of heavily swathed windows. I looked down on the lawn with its neatly clipped boxwood hedges and rosebushes bulging with blooms, and then I ran down the gantlet of windows expecting you to grab me.

At my door I pawed through my bag for the key. My trembling hand made it clatter outside the lock. I finally inserted the key and entered my apartment.

With the double-locked door at my back I whimpered with relief, but fear had drained me. I stood as still as an autistic child, as if any movement from me might arouse your wrath.

At last I fell across the bed in exhaustion and went to sleep,

and then, after a while I awoke. My bed was a grave. I couldn't move. Wind blew through the windows. The curtains fluttered, swirled—one reached out and stroked my cheek. I had left the windows beside my bed open and the fire escape was just outside. It was an invitation to you to enter, an overt sign of welcome. I was like a virgin who invites rape. I was like a miser who entices thieves.

I glanced at the clock. Another night is over. There is some small comfort in the precise and orderly ticking of the clock, but only dread in the prospect of another day that will wither and become rancid by my fear of you.

Suppose I were to surrender. I'm weary of suspense. I'm tired of being wary.

But I won't surrender. Keep away from me. Mollie will be here soon. She'll protect me from you. I think that's her key in the lock now. Don't touch me. Keep away—

"I think she was afraid of you, Doctor."

"No, Mollie, she wasn't afraid of me. We've known each other since childhood. There was only one thing in the world for her to be afraid of—death."



Celia Fremlin

Waiting for the Police

Again Celia Fremlin with her special "touch," her special magic...

"To plant a new lilac, you say? But you didn't need to've cleared the whole bloomin' bed, a whole six foot of it, just to plant a lilac bush!"

The topsoil had been easy. He remembered how lightly the spade had tossed the loose earth this way and that in the moonlight. For those first minutes it had all been as effortless as in a dream—the strange euphoria of the previous evening was still flowing strongly in his veins, giving his thin young arms the strength, almost, of a grown man.

But two feet down he came to the clay—the sullen, sodden, implacable London clay; and it was only then that the dreamlike omnipotence began to drain out of him. Now the sweat of terror began to glisten on his forehead and his skinny adolescent arms began to quiver with exhaustion.

The length was all right. The uprooted dahlias and the shaggy, seeding willow-herb lay blanched in the moonlight along half the length of the devastated autumn flowerbed. But only two feet deep! It would have to be deeper than that, much deeper. Four feet? Six? Years of wide but desultory reading of lurid paperbacked stories had not provided him with this sort of solid, factual information; but any fool could see that a depth of two feet would not be enough.

He was crying now, in a sort of weak fury at the obstinate, devilish clay. He would have stamped and stormed at it, throwing a tantrum like a toddler, if it had not been for all those silent, curtained windows overlooking, like lightly closed eyes, the whole row of little back gardens. Any moment now one of those sleeping eyes might open, with a streak of yellow light between the curtains, and a sly sleepy voice would call out, "What's going on there?" or maybe, more raucously, "Shut that bleedin' row!"

This soft squelch of spade on clay—*was* it a bleedin' row? Of course it was—it seemed to him that it must be heard for miles! And then there would be more voices, more cracks of light, eyes everywhere, queries called across the cloying darkness. Would it be best, when all this began happening, to make a clean breast of it? To tell them straightaway, in a ringing shout, before they came flitting out of the doors and alleyways, over the fences, like ghosts attracted by the smell of blood, to find out what was going on?

"I have killed my love," he would yell to them across the gardens, across the closed, listening night swept silent by the moon. "I have killed my love, my only love. She was with Cyril—Cyril from the Gas Board offices, with his posh voice and natty suit. She was standing by the front door, I could see her face in the moonlight, and when she saw me coming she laughed. She pointed, and she whispered to Cyril, and then he laughed, too.

"That was their last laugh, though, the last laugh they'll ever have. He ran away like I've never seen a man run, nor even a rat; and her, she's lying there in the passage where I dragged her. I hope—yes, the thing I hope most of all—is that she was still alive just long enough to see him run like that, see him run away like a rat, and never lifted a finger to protect her! That's what I hope—she was alive just long enough to see—to see it, and to know it, before she died."

The clay, the damnable accursed clay! Tears of fury and terror streaked the boy's thin moon-blanced face; his breath came in feeble sobs, like the sobs of the wet clay under the onslaughts of his jabbing spade.

But he did not give up. He couldn't give up, for soon it would be dawn, and then bright morning, and the cover of darkness would be gone. So he struggled on, and gradually, inch by inch, as if dragging at the very intestines of the earth, he got the clay to move; and presently, into his trance of exhaustion, there came, dully, the knowledge that the hole was deep enough at last. As deep as it would ever be. Deep enough anyway, for his love, his sweet treacherous love.

Oh, but the dangers still ahead! With morning, the neighbors would come. "Getting busy in the garden, eh? Them dahlias—you didn't oughter 'a' pulled up them dahlias, not while they're still flowering. What a shame! Just look at them, all them colors!"

"To plant a new lilac, you say? But you didn't need to've cleared

the whole bloomin' bed, a whole six foot of it, just to plant a lilac bush! Besides, what does a young lad like you want with a lilac? It's only a rented room you got in there, innit? You'll be gone off, lad, somewheres else, that's for sure, long before that lilac can bloom!"

But as the days went by, the questioning died down. Gradually the horticultural experts of the little street lost interest in the boy's folly, and turned their attention back to their own gardens; and at last the boy himself began to sleep again at night, instead of lying tense as whipcord through the black hours, waiting for the police to come for him.

And so the autumn passed, and a long sodden December, and while it was still winter, before even the crocuses had begun to show their first leaves, tiny green things had already begun to sprout in the flat untidy soil above his own true love. Weeds, presumably, but he never found out for certain; nor did he ever know whether the lilac bloomed, for, just as the neighbors had predicted, before this could possibly have happened, he was gone.

"Now, come along, Mr. Parsons! Drink up! Just look at Mrs. Carruthers, she's on her second cup already, you're getting left all behind. Come on, Mr. Parsons, wakey, wakey! What's the good of bringing you out into the garden for your tea when you just—oh, dear! Shall I hold the saucer for you? There, is that better? Can you manage now?"

The young woman's voice went on and on, bright and bracing, but he had been at the Old People's Home a long time now, and he no longer listened. Nor was he bothered any longer by the sweet tepid tea which his throat was obediently gulping from the expertly tipped cup.

He was aware only of the lilac in full bloom, above and all around him, and the sweet May breeze stirring the mauve blossoms, heavy with bees. Now that he was more than 90 years old, he was finding it hard to distinguish the sweet summer days, one from another, over the long years.

He was a little confused, too, about the lilacs—so many of them there had been, in gardens here and gardens there, blooming and fading, through 90 springtimes. By now they were all the same lilac, and beneath it lay his love, his first and only love, with her bright hair and her green enchanting eyes.

Over the long years he had waited for the police; but they had

never caught him, never even suspected anything. He recalled how, over the years, the guilt and terror had gradually faded, to be buried at last, forever, under the turmoil of the rushing adult years. Marriage—children—work; success and failure; and more work; they had come and gone, and now at last he was close to her again, close to his first love, as lovely still as on the day he had killed her.

Killed her. How thankful he was now that he had done it! That he had killed her then, on that moonlit autumn night, in the full flower of her loveliness, more than 70 years ago! A murderer in shining armor, he had saved her from this Old People's Home as surely as St. George had saved his princess from the dragon.

They would never get her now! Not for her the shameful, slobbering gulps of tea from a cup that her trembling hands could no longer manage; not for her the wheel chair, or the bright, professional voices impatiently jollying her through the dim dead days.

Not for her the crutches, the pointless tottering round and round the smooth, terrible lawns. Not for her the ill-fitting teeth, the mislaid spectacles, the endless, feeble bickering of the old, as thin as the mewing of seagulls left stranded by a tide that has gone out too far ever to turn again.

"Thank God I murdered you, my darling," he murmured into the lilac-scented air; and the nurse, noticing that old Mr. Parsons was mumbling to himself again, and slobbering over his cup, decided it was time to wheel him indoors.



Patricia McGerr

Nothing But the Truth

"If there's a thin line between a saint and a fool, Ruth walked very close to that line."

An engrossing crime-detective story in which service-station owner Nathan Sprague—good old steady, hard-working, dependable Nate—found himself in a most unusual situation. What would you have done in Nate Sprague's position? We warn you, it won't be an easy decision . . .

That Sunday was, in its beginning, no different from any other Sunday. I got up about 7:30 and put the coffee on to boil while I shaved and dressed. Then I had my usual breakfast—corn flakes and milk, toast with grape jelly, and coffee. I was finishing the second cup when the bell rang to let me know that a car was driving into the service station.

I hurried down the stairs, through the office, and out to the pumps. It was a '69 Pontiac with out-of-state tags and it took 12.8 gallons of high test. I entered the sale in my log, noting the time as 8:15, then went back to my living quarters to make the bed and wash the dishes.

It was kind of chilly for the end of April, so I pulled a sweater on over my work shirt. With the chores done, I settled down in the office to tot up the week's receipts and write an order for the supplies I needed for the month ahead.

Business is always slow on Sunday mornings. My station is at the junction of State Highway 40 and the road to Morristown. That's a town in name only—a two-block business district surrounded by farms—and the people don't do much Sunday gadding. It's a good day for paperwork and I finished with only two interruptions, both from the highway. A '66 Mercury took 12 gallons of regular and a '63 Volks wanted directions to a turnoff he'd missed a mile and a half back.

I was putting the order into its envelope when I heard the first car on the Morristown road. By the sound it was traveling faster than is safe or legal on the two-lane gravel surface that is still as winding as the cowpath that provided its original design. There's a stand of timber behind my station, so I can't see vehicles till they're almost here. This one hardly slowed for the turn into the station and pulled up beside the pumps with tires screeching. It was Chad Bascom in his '72 Chevy.

"Fill 'er up, Gimpy," he said.

I walked to the back of the car with the heat starting someplace near the bottom of my stomach and rising in waves to the top of my head. My fingers were unsteady when I unscrewed the top of his gas tank and I was afraid, when I set the nozzle down, he'd hear the clatter and get satisfaction from knowing he'd pushed me once more to blind and trembling rage.

You'd think that after twenty years I'd be immune to Bascom's insults, that a single word, so often repeated, would have lost its power to send my blood pressure soaring. I stood still while three gallons flowed through the hose and while I built a fantasy of lighting a match and bringing gas and flame together to turn his car into a fiery coffin. Then, as the throbbing in my temples eased, I picked up the spray bottle and paper towels and cleaned his back window. When that was done I did the same to the front, keeping my lips tightpressed to hold back an answer to anything he might say. But today, for a change, he didn't keep on riding me, just sat in stony silence till I was forced to speak.

"Check under the hood?" I asked.

"The way you move," he snapped, "that would take all day. Put the lid on and let me out of here."

The pump cut off at 13.2. I squeezed out a few more drops to make it an even \$5 and capped his tank. He thrust a \$5 bill at me and had the car moving almost before I could step out of the way. I went into the office, put the money in the register, looked at the clock on my desk, and entered it in the log: "10:10—13.2 regular—\$5."

Then I stood at the window and watched Chad Bascom's car head north on the highway. There's a straight stretch of almost a mile with good visibility, but even after he was out of sight I still stood there with my eyes on the white-lined asphalt. Going to the city, I thought, on his way to a good time—with Ruth, predictably, left behind.

I wasn't really seeing the highway. My thoughts, as always after an encounter with Chad, turned inward. Gimpy he'd called me and gimpy he'd made me. Time had honed my anger to a bitter edge and my hatred now had a depth and hardness that would have been beyond my capabilities at the time it happened.

I was a year out of Ag College then and had put my savings into the old Mullen place. The mortgage payments were manageable, the spring weather benign, and a good crop would have permitted me to buy a tractor and modernize the kitchen. After the harvest Ruth Hadley and I were going to be married. We weren't engaged—folks in our community don't formalize things that way; but ever since high school it was taken for granted that as soon as I was able to make my own way and had a place to take her, it would be Ruthie and me for life. Nobody had to tell me how lucky I was.

Ruth wasn't the prettiest girl in our class. Thelma Frankes, with her blonde curls and china-blue eyes, had that distinction. But in any group it was Ruth your eyes kept coming back to. Her dark brown hair had a sheen that caught the play of light and shadow. Her eyes were brown too and held a glint of humor that even her most serious mood couldn't quite vanquish. What held attention, though, was her sheer aliveness, the sense she passed to all around of a deep and bubbling joy.

I never knew what she saw in me. I was that nice Sprague boy. Good old Nate Sprague. Steady, honest, hard-working, dependable. All the adjectives were dull. But Ruth looked at me as if we shared a wonderful secret. And I could never look at her without a sense of inner singing. Not in those days.

That June was the fifth reunion of our high-school graduating class. We met in the gym and danced to records and reminisced. There were platters loaded with sandwiches and a bowl of punch made from grape juice blended with ginger ale. Chad Bascom's class was holding its tenth reunion in the cafeteria. Late in the evening he crossed the hall to the gym. I was dancing with Ruth when I noticed him first. He was standing near the door looking over the crowd with something in his expression that was like a cattleman at an auction. I wondered whom he was looking for and then forgot him until a few moments later I felt a sharp rap on my shoulder.

"Cutting in, partner," he said.

That's an alien custom in our county. When we bring a girl to a

party we dance with her all evening. Or maybe, if two or three couples come together, we trade off a few dances within the group. But Chad was an older man with big-city ways. I looked at Ruth and she gave her little what's-it-matter shrug, so I let him dance with her.

At the time it didn't seem important. I leaned against the wall and watched them. Together they made a very pretty picture. Like him or not, no one could deny Chad's handsomeness. He was big, well over six feet, with rock-hard muscles. And he was a far better dancer than I. Ruth's natural rhythm matched his and they seemed to float across the floor as a single body.

"Better watch out, Nate." A classmate stopped beside me, only half kidding. "That Bascom's a grade-A wolf."

I knew Chad's reputation, but it didn't worry me. I was too sure of Ruthie. When the dance ended he kept his arm around her and guided her to the refreshment table. I followed and saw him fill two paper cups from a pint bottle he took from his back pocket.

"This'll put back our bounce," he said.

"No, thank you," she refused politely. "I'd rather have punch."

"Punch with no punch in it." He pushed his own brew toward her. "Come on, baby, live a little."

I went to the bowl, ladled punch into a cup, and carried it to Ruth. Chad gave me an ugly look.

"Don't crowd me, youngster," he said. "I'm taking care of the lady."

I tried to ignore him and offered her the cup. He knocked it out of my hand and purple drops splattered her white linen dress. She looked frightened. Chad, I realized, had already drunk most of his pint.

"Let's go home, Nate," she said.

"Yes, sure." I moved to her side, but Chad put the flat of his hand on my chest and pushed me away.

"Stay out of this, small fry," he warned. "I said I'd take care of the lady." He took Ruth's arm, tightening his hold as she tried to pull away. "I'll see you home, baby, by the longest way round."

I sprang at him with a fist that was aimed at his chin but landed on his shoulder. His surprise and my momentum nearly knocked him off balance, but my advantage was brief. He was four inches taller and 40 pounds heavier. Almost before I knew it I was on the floor with a feeling that the room was rocking like a boat. He nudged my side with the steel-tipped toe of his boot.

"Get up, boy," he ordered. "I got some more things to show you."

I tried to raise my head and focus my eyes. Chad drew back his foot and kicked me with stunning force. The last thing I saw was his mouth stretched in an exultant grin.

I was in the hospital for five months. The hip bone was shattered and at first it looked as if I'd spend the rest of my life on crutches. Twice Ruth drove 90 miles to visit me. The first time I asked her not to come again. The second time I had the doctor tell her that seeing her was bad for my morale. That was true. I'd been shamed in front of her and I couldn't stand being reminded of that or of all that I'd so nearly had and lost.

Later they moved me to a hospital in another state where there was a surgeon especially skilled in bone grafts. The operation was successful and I came home almost as good as new, except that my left leg was two inches shorter than my right.

While I was healing, my neighbors pitched in to save my crop. And the county sheriff had a long talk with Chad. He offered him a choice—pay my medical bills or face trial on assault charges. As a result I left the hospital in fair financial condition. But a farmer needs to work on two good legs. So I sold my land and made a down payment on this gas station. With the second story fixed up as a small apartment it makes a good enough living for a man alone.

Since Ruth and I weren't formally engaged, there was nothing to break off. I kept away from her and when her mother called or her friends came round I told them it was over and Ruth should forget me. A woman like Ruth deserves a whole man and I just couldn't take her pity. Chad moved quickly to fill the vacuum and those same friends described the smoothness of his operation.

When sober and trying, Chad could display great charm. He came to her first with profuse apologies for his behavior while under the influence. He let her know that he was taking care of my medical expenses, but he carefully neglected to mention Sheriff Crane's alternative. He took her to movies and dances and was always a perfect gentleman. He won her mother with flattery and her younger brother with presents. He told her he loved her and needed her and wanted nothing in life so much as to make her happy.

Six months after I began living above my service station, Ruth became Mrs. Chad Bascom.

I tried not to hate him. A man shouldn't be held responsible for what he does when he's drunk. I had been a fool to stand up to him. He hadn't taken Ruth from me, I'd given her up. Those were the things I told myself to hold down the bile that surged up at the thought of him. After a while I was able, most of the time, to put him out of my mind.

He seldom patronized my station and I seldom left the premises. It was painful going out among my old friends with things so changed and I had everything I needed right at home. The weekly bookmobile supplied plenty of reading material, and daily banter with my customers was sufficient social life. So I was a long time learning how things really were between Ruth and Chad.

I heard a few things. People who came by the station dropped hints that he was giving her a bad time. They told stories about his jealousy, how he raged if she smiled too brightly at another man. Some even said he beat her, that they'd seen bruises on her face and arms. But I know how easily gossip starts in a small town and how quickly it can grow. I didn't encourage them to talk and dismissed their tales as puffed-up versions of normal crises in married life. Perhaps, I told myself, they were exaggerating on purpose, thinking it would cheer me to believe the marriage had turned sour. Then Ruth's mother began to call me and I discovered the reports weren't exaggerated at all.

Mrs. Hadley and I had been close in the early days. My own mother died when I was 13 and in high school and when I was eating more dinners at the Hadley house than at home, I had started to call her Ma. She seemed to like it and joked sometimes about my being the first young man to choose a mother-in-law ahead of a wife.

For the first few years after the marriage I didn't hear from her. Then Ruth's brother went off to college and Mrs. Hadley's arthritis got so bad she couldn't go out much. I guess that gave us a special bond—both alone, both crippled. Anyway, she began to phone and tell me her worries. Mostly they had to do with Chad's treatment of Ruth.

"Ruthie doesn't tell me half of it," she said. "She tries to pretend everthing's all right. But I've seen her eyes red and puffy with crying. Sometimes there are black and blue marks she can't hide. And I've heard him yell at her as if she were his servant. Remember, Nathan, how bright and pretty she always was? You wouldn't know her now."

Others too spoke of these changes. Ruth had lost her looks and her vitality, and she seemed to care little about her appearance. Chad no longer had cause for jealousy, but that didn't improve his temper. Instead he berated her for being such a poor stick that no other man would look at her. It was as if he'd set out deliberately to break her spirit and then, having succeeded, made the deterioration that he caused another mark against her. He used it too as excuse for infidelity.

He drove often to the city, sometimes stayed two or three days. The rumor was he had a woman there. On his return he'd be more cruel than ever to Ruth, as if that was a way of working off his guilt.

I didn't want to hear these things, but I couldn't endure not knowing either. One of the worst times was after her miscarriage. She was in the hospital for nearly a week and Mrs. Hadley was barely coherent when she told me about it.

"He hit her in the stomach," she sobbed. "A woman four months pregnant! Now she can't have children, the doctor says. But maybe that's a blessing. It's bad enough what he's done to my girl, but to see an innocent little one at his mercy—who could bear it? You should have married her, Nathan." It was the nearest she ever came to reproach me. "When you turned away from her he was there. And none of us saw the brute inside him."

Ruth's friends tried to persuade her to leave him. Some thought he should be sent to jail and Sheriff Crane went to the hospital to ask if she was willing to bring charges. But she gave everyone the same answer. Chad was her husband. She'd promised to honor and obey him for better or for worse and she was bound, whatever he did, by that promise. If there's a thin line between a saint and a fool, Ruth Bascom walked very close to that line.

A peculiar thing happened after that. Chad began coming more and more often to my service station. Some perverse streak seemed to make him want to draw me into the orbit of their discontent. The purchase of a few gallons of gas bought him the right to rail at his wife's misery and my helplessness.

"You ought to give me a discount," he said once. "That gimp leg of yours cost me a packet. Maybe you think your girl was my payoff. Boy, was I ever fooled! You should come out some time and see the sourpuss bag of bones she's turned into. Could it be you knew something I didn't?"

I learned to say nothing, not even to look at him, just to fill his

tank, take his money, and pretend not to hear his taunts. But they got under my skin, every one of them, and grated long after he was gone. Sometimes he thought up small meannesses, like buying just one gallon of gas and asking me to check the battery and all the tires. Hé watched with a sneering smile as I hobbled and bent my way around the car. "Shake that short leg," he jeered. "I've places to go even if you don't." I gritted my teeth and told myself that if he got the spite out of his system here, maybe he'd take less home to Ruth.

So I felt relieved, that Sunday morning, because he was in and out of the station in such a hurry and with so little to say. I serviced three more cars before going upstairs to make myself a liverwurst sandwich and reheat the coffee. I had just returned to the office when the phone rang. It was Mrs. Hadley.

"Oh, Nathan!" Her voice was strange, low and breathy as if each word was pulled from a deep pit. "Nathan, is that you?"

"Yes, Ma. Is something wrong?"

"You haven't heard yet? Oh, Nathan!"

"What is it? Has something happened to Ruth?"

"My poor girl!" It was a drawn-out wail. "Nathan, he's killed her."

"My God!" Blood rushed to my head and I grasped the edge of the desk to keep from falling. "How—what—"

My disturbance neutralized hers. She told me the story in a flat tone as if it had grown stale with repetition.

"I didn't go to church this morning, my arthritis was that bad. Instead I listened to Pastor Meyer on television. His text was 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice's sake,' and it was beautiful. He could have been talking about Ruthie, I thought, and as soon as he finished I called to tell her what he said. But we only talked for two or three minutes when she said, 'I've got to go now, Ma. Thanks for calling,' in that scared voice she uses when he comes into the room and catches her at something he doesn't like. 'I've got to go now, Ma. Thanks for calling.' Those are the last words I'll ever hear her say."

"What did he do to her?" My fingers ached from the tight grip I had on the phone.

"Maybe she told him about Pastor Meyer's sermon." She went on as if she hadn't heard my question. "Maybe she repeated the part about people who suffer in doing their duty and earn a high place in heaven. That might have set off one of his rages. He

doesn't like her talking to me anyway. I shouldn't have called. It's my fault what happened."

"What did he do to her?"

"Joachim and Kitty found her." Kitty is Ruth's cousin, but they were as close as sisters. "They drove round that way, thinking if he wasn't home she might like to go to church with them. When they didn't see his car, they went up to the back door. They saw her through the window. She was dead, Nathan. She was already dead. He'd hit her—like he was always hitting her—but this time he broke her neck."

"He was here, Ma." I said the first thing that came into my head, trying to shut out the picture her words made. "He stopped here for gas, then drove off toward the city."

"They'll catch him, Nathan. They'll bring him back and make him pay for what he's done."

"Yes, Ma," I said, "he'll pay."

For a long time after she hung up I sat and stared at the phone as if it might have more to tell me. Dead, I thought. Ruth is dead. All our dreams, all we planned to do together, and this is how it ends. But our dreams and plans were twenty years out of date and what had ended for her was pain and humiliation and despair. I couldn't, in honesty, mourn her death. On an obscure impulse, seeking a share in her last moments, I went to my bookshelf, pulled out my Bible, and opened it to the Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Ruth was poor in spirit. Ruth was meek. Ruth was persecuted. She lived by those words and she died by them. Had she, at the last, found comfort in her mother's quotation from the TV preacher's sermon?

I put the Bible down and my thoughts turned from Ruth to Chad. Now I understood his haste, why he didn't play his usual games with me. He had just killed her and was making his escape. His tank was low and he couldn't risk running out of gas on the road. If I had looked at him I might have read what he had done in his face. How long was it, I wondered, between the murder and the time I saw him?

The county paper was on my table. It comes out on Thursdays and carries the television schedule for the week. I spread it out and ran my eyes up the Sunday column till they reached Pastor

Meyer's name. He was on, it told me, from 9:30 to 10:00 A.M. So Mrs. Hadley had called Ruth at ten o'clock. And Chad had driven into my station a few minutes later.

It took several seconds for the two facts to meet in my mind and register. It wasn't possible. It couldn't have happened that way, it absolutely couldn't. The Bascom place is 25 miles from here over a very rough and winding road. The best driver, the fastest driver, can't make it in less than 40 minutes. Chad must have left home before the TV program even began.

So Mrs. Hadley had to be mistaken. She'd listened to some other preacher. I looked again at the newspaper schedule. There's only one channel that reaches our area. Its first Sunday program, from 8:00 to 9:00 A.M., was made up of children's cartoons. From 9:00 to 9:30 the Department of Agriculture had a special report. Pastor Meyer's sermon was the only one Ruth's mother could have heard. And my own log proved that Chad left my station with a filled tank at 10:10.

He must have gone back, I reasoned. That's the only answer. He couldn't have been home when Mrs. Hadley phoned Ruth. After he left here he must have remembered something he'd forgotten and circled back. He found Ruth doing something he disapproved—like getting ready to go to church—and struck her down.

It was the only answer, but it wasn't a good one. I remember how long I'd stood at the window after Chad was out of sight, speeding toward the city. The only road from the highway to his house is the one that goes by my station. And I'm conditioned to be aware of every passing car. How could he have turned round, come back, and gone down that road without my knowing? Especially on Sunday morning when traffic is so light. It could only have happened when I was servicing another car, perhaps with my head under the hood.

That theory lasted a short while, till the Kroehler brothers brought in their Ford pickup. It took only 4.4 gallons, so I knew they'd come to find out if I'd heard the news and how I was taking it. I said yes, I'd heard, and didn't tell them any more. But that didn't stop them from sharing the news they'd gathered elsewhere.

Jointly the Kroehlers play the role of town crier. They'd talked to Joachim and learned, among other things, that it was 10:40 when he and Kitty got to the Bascom house. He was sure of the time because the church service began at 11:00 and they were

worried about being late. So there was no way that Chad could have made it home ahead of Joachim and Kitty.

For a moment I toyed with the notion that he'd left her dying but not dead, that she'd lived a half hour or so, long enough to receive her mother's call. One of the Kroehlers answered that question without my asking it.

"She died instantly, the doc said," he reported. "Didn't suffer at all, Nate, if that's any consolation to you."

"And Chad will get his just deserts," his brother added. "The sheriff ought to be back with him pretty soon."

"They've caught him?" I asked.

"Sure. He has a woman in the city. The sheriff's known about her for a long time—he doesn't miss many tricks, old Crane doesn't—and he figured that's who he'd run to. The sheriff phoned the city police, they went round and picked him up, and Crane and his deputy drove in to get him. Reckon Chad thought he had more time to plan a getaway. Ordinarily it might have been a day or so before anybody found Ruth's body. Joachim and Kitty stopping by was his bad luck."

I didn't contradict him and a few minutes later they drove away. I went into the office, entered their 4.4 gallons in the log, and gazed at the earlier entry. "10:10—13.2 regular—\$5." Chad hadn't killed Ruth and the proof was right in front of me. I realized then that what had borne me up, what had made Ruth's death a tolerable fact, was the belief that it carried the seeds of Chad's destruction. He had at last done something for which he would be punished—punished to the full extent of the law.

Now that prop was pulled from under me. Someone else had murdered Ruth. A stranger, perhaps a tramp. I didn't care who had done it. All that mattered was that Chad was not guilty and would go free. He was probably lording it over the sheriff right now, showing him up in front of the city police as a hick who went chasing after the wrong man while the right one got away.

I was surprised, therefore, about an hour later to get a call from Sheriff Crane.

"Mrs. Hadley says she called you about Ruth," he began. "A bad business, Nate."

"Yes."

"You told her Chad got gas at your place?"

"That's right."

"Good. I'll be right over to talk to you. Your evidence should fill

in the last gap in our case against him."

"You've arrested Chad?"

"Just locked him in the jail." There was grim satisfaction in his tone. "His next stop will be the state prison."

"You still think he did it?"

"Not a doubt in the world."

"But he—he hasn't confessed, has he?"

"Chad? Not a chance! He denied everything and then clammed up. You don't catch him doing anything to make my job easier. See you in a few minutes, Nate."

So Chad was in jail charged with murder. At least he'd have a bad hour or so. Until the sheriff heard my story and went back to set him free. Was I the only one who'd seen him, the only one who could swear he was miles away from home at the time of the murder? God in heaven, I prayed, don't play that kind of trick on me. Don't make me the instrument of Chad's freedom.

Yet there it was in my logbook, in black and white, in my own handwriting—the incontestable proof of his innocence.

But he's not innocent! The protest was thunder in my brain. He's black with guilt. What if he didn't strike the final, fatal blow? What he did to Ruth, day in, day out, was worse than murder. He deserves a murderer's penalty. Everybody in town will agree to that. I'd be nobody's hero if I saved him. So why do it? Why should I give Chad an ironclad alibi?

The more I thought about it, the more right it seemed. Chad had been arrested for Ruth's murder. Without my evidence he would be tried and convicted—not a shadow of doubt about it. All I had to do was fudge the time a little, say it was later when he came to my station. Or perhaps it would be best to be vague. Might have been 10:30, I'd say, or maybe 11:00. It's quiet here on Sunday morning, so I don't pay much attention to what time it is. That way I wouldn't need to perjure myself, probably wouldn't even be called as a witness. Chad would be convicted without my saying a word.

I closed the log and pushed it under the order forms in the bottom drawer of my desk. No one even knew I kept a log. There was no reason for anyone else to see it. Twenty years, I told myself. Twenty years since he crippled me and stole my girl. But I mustn't think of that. Not about my own injury. I was seeking retribution for Ruth. That mustn't be tainted with thoughts of personal revenge.

Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay. The long-forgotten text came unwanted to my mind. But the Lord, I answered, uses human agents. And there's justice, the purest kind of justice, in convicting Chad for Ruth's murder. The person who killed her only stopped her breathing, her suffering. The life that person took today ended many years ago and Chad was the destroyer. He deserves to pay for that and I have no obligation to testify in his defense.

There had been, I realized suddenly, something odd in my conversation with the sheriff. It was Mrs. Hadley who told him about Chad's stopping here for gas. Chad hadn't mentioned it. Why not, I wondered. Ruth was alive when he left home and he knows that I can help establish the time. Why hadn't he said so?

The answer to that was easy. He knows how much I hate him. He's sure I'll never lift a finger to help him. He didn't send the sheriff to me because he was afraid I'd seize the chance to lie and make it worse for him. I'd only be doing what Chad expects, acting as he would if he were in my place.

With that thought I knew exactly what I had to do. One Chad Bascom in this world is enough. I could not—no matter how righteous the words in which I cloaked my motive—remake myself in his image. When the sheriff drove up to the door I was waiting with the logbook in my hand.

He sat in my office and went over it again and again, as if I might, in repeating it, change my story. The logbook lay open on the desk between us.

"You're sure that's the record of Chad's buy?" Crane's index finger moved on to the line below. "Not this one? The later time would fit."

"I'm positive he's the one at ten past ten," I said wearily. "I remember his snapping that \$5 bill at me. And the 10:55 entry shows a quart of oil. Chad got nothing but gas."

"That pulls it apart. I checked the television station to confirm the time and text of Pastor Meyer's sermon. He talked about blessing the persecuted and went off the air at 9:58. Ruth was alive and talking to her mother at ten o'clock. So your story gives Chad an airtight alibi."

His tone was angry, blaming me for the flaw in his case. "When it comes to credibility he couldn't have a better witness. His woman would protect him, he might have gotten a pal to lie for him. He could even bribe a stranger. But you, Nate—when you

testify on Chad's side it has to be the truth."

"Yes," I said, "it's the truth."

"Funny thing," Crane went on. "Chad's been taken off the hook by the testimony of the three people who'd most like to make him pay for what he did to Ruth—her mother, her cousin Kitty, and you."

And me, I added mentally. A sanctimonious fool who couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Nothing left but to go back to the jail and turn him loose." His lips twisted in a humorless smile. "With apologies yet."

The bell rang and I left him sitting there while I went out to fill another tank. When I came back he was pacing the length of the office with an air of great impatience. I wondered why he hadn't left.

"Go on." He waved me to the desk. "Write up your sale."

I did so and he moved round beside me. "Is that"—he pointed to the desk clock—"your only timepiece?"

"I've a watch upstairs. I don't wear it when I'm working. That clock keeps good time."

"Okay, let me see what you just wrote."

Puzzled, I pushed the log toward him and let him read the last line: "5:20—11.3 gallons high test—\$4.55."

"Then it's all right." He let out his breath in a long sigh. "We've got Chad tied up in a neat package."

"I don't understand."

"This is the last Sunday in April, Nate. Daylight Saving Time began this morning, but you didn't turn your clock forward." He thrust his left arm in front of my face, pushed back the sleeve. His watch said 6:20. "Chad was here not at 10:10, but at 11:10—one hour later than you thought."

"Q"

Lawrence Treat

M As in Missing

Well, there was this worry that Inspector Mitch Taylor and his wife Amy had about Joey's poor marks in school, and what to do about it, and along came this real cutie of a case—what Lieutenant Decker called a lollapaloosa, a humdinger—and Mitch couldn't duck it. But it's funny how things work out—Joey's marks, for Pete's sake! . . .

Detectives: HOMICIDE SQUAD

Inspector Mitch Taylor had this paperwork to do, and somehow, when you're sitting there in the squad room with a form in front of you, you start thinking a bunch of other things. And what Mitch was thinking of mostly was that report card of Joey's. It was pretty bad, and while the kid was no genius, he had a good enough head to get by in school, so why didn't he?

Mitch and Amy put the question up to Joey himself. The kid kind of rubbed the toe of one sneaker against the hole in the other one and made the hole a little bigger. Then, catching on that this wouldn't get him anywhere, he said the trouble was he just couldn't remember stuff too good.

Mitch, who had an A-1 memory, asked the kid who were the top ten batters in the American League last year, and Joey rattled them off like they were part of his own name. After that Mitch told him to go on out and play.

When Joey had beat it, Mitch and Amy talked things over and Amy kept saying the trouble was that Joey wasn't motivated. Mitch said okay, but how do you motivate him? Neither of them had an answer to that one, and Mitch was thinking about it while he sat there at the desk and stopped doing his paperwork. And he was still putting off the paperwork when this couple came in.

The way the Homicide Squad worked, you sort of rotated cases when the Lieutenant wasn't around to take charge, which he

wasn't, so Mitch got stuck with his one. He told the pair to sit down, and before they even told him what it was all about, he sort of sized them up.

The guy said his name was Gus Hannibal. He had a head that sat low on his shoulders, with not much neck to him, and he had friendly gray eyes over a beak of a nose, and from the dirt under his fingernails Mitch figured he was some kind of a mechanic. And Mitch was dead right on that, on account it turned out Gus was an auto mechanic and owned his own garage, which he would have told you was just about the best one in North America.

He was nuts about this dame with him, Pamela Dover, and she was something to be nuts about, too. She reminded Mitch a little of Amy, the way she moved light and easy and looked like a spring day and made you feel that way, besides. This Pamela, she was dressed up like she'd just come from Paris, and Mitch found out he was right on that one, too.

Gus led off with the story, although it was strictly Pamela's. First off it sounded okay, but after a couple of minutes Mitch sort of wondered. He kept making notes on his pad, chiefly for the sake of form, but he realized that the real problem here was to find himself an out. Because a whooper like this—all about a magic room and a disappearing nut—it made the pair of them sound like a couple of nuts.

The way Mitch usually handled screwball stuff like this was, he said he'd be glad to help out, but he wondered whether this was what they really wanted. Because an investigation like this, particularly for a schoolteacher like he found out this Pamela was, you want to think of how it's going to affect you. There's the nuisance and the worry, and then what about the principal of the school and maybe some of the parents, too—what would happen when they heard about this?

That would have been okay if Pamela had been alone. Except with Gus here who was liable to blow his top and insist on Pamela pushing the charge, with him here, Mitch figured there was maybe a better way. He could be all sympathy but point out that this was really precinct stuff, and then he'd give them the address of their neighborhood precinct house and send them up there. And Mitch was all set to do just that until Gus ended up saying Pamela had been shot at and almost killed, and then knocked out. Which made it Homicide Squad business, and something Mitch couldn't kiss off.

Still, Mitch believed only half of what they told him, and while he knew he'd have to do a little investigating he was no eager beaver and so his main problem was still how to get rid of them. Because he was beginning to get an idea of what had really happened, and he saw how he could get the whole thing off his back.

"We'll look into it," he said politely. "But as far as your aunt is concerned, this Bessie Bell, that's not our business. You go down the hall to Missing Persons, second door on the right, and give them the information. They'll take care of you."

That got rid of them, and seeing as how it was a question of either filling out the report that Mitch had started a half hour ago, or else checking on a few simple things that might clear up the whole Dover business, he picked up the phone and went to work on it. When he'd finished it was time to go home, and he left. So it wasn't until the next morning that he talked things over with the boss, Lieutenant Decker.

"I got a real cutie," Mitch said. He was sitting in the Lieutenant's cubbyhole of an office where if you backed up too far you'd knock over all the magazines piled up on the extra chairs. "Here are the names and addresses," Mitch said, sliding the stuff across the desk. "This Dover dame went to Europe on a tour, only the tour went broke and she came back a week early. She claims she walked into her apartment and found it all messed up, and a strange guy in a red shirt sitting there and guzzling beer. Naturally she got kind of upset, and she says the guy pulled a gun on her and then she passed out. Didn't wake up until the next day."

"That was yesterday?" the Lieutenant said, staring at the names.

"That's right," Mitch said. "She wasn't hurt, but she had a headache and the apartment looked exactly like it had before she'd left for Europe. No more mess. She says she checked up on all kinds of details, like where she'd left her cleaning tissues on the night table and whether the dishes were all stacked the same way, and everything was in order. Then she called Gus, and the pair of them came over here and asked us to investigate."

"Brother!" Decker said. "Sounds like we got a lollapaloosa!"

"That's only part of it," Mitch said. "She has an aunt out in Sacramento who was supposed to come and live in the apartment while Pamela was away. Name of Bessie Bell. She was due two days after Pamela left, and Gus had promised to meet her at the airport and take her to the apartment. But Gus forgot about her,

or else he was busy fixing up somebody's car or something, and it seems like the aunt never showed up at the apartment. Because she didn't answer the phone, and the note Pamela left for her, along with a couple of presents—they were still there when Pamela woke up yesterday. And yet Missing Persons looked into the Bessie Bell business and she *was* on the passenger list of Flight 183, just like she was supposed to be, and she did land here on July second. Then I checked with Sacramento, and she never got back there."

"What do you make of it?" the Lieutenant asked.

"She maybe got rolled and then knocked off," Mitch said. "She had dough and could have been carrying a wad, and you know them gypsy cab drivers out at the airport. But we got no complaint, not yet anyway. So far that's Missing Persons' headache."

"But Pamela and what happened in her apartment," Decker said, "is right in our laps. Assault with a deadly weapon, plus a few other things."

"The way it stacks up," Mitch said, "I figure maybe she picked up a boy friend on the plane and spent the night with him. But if Gus ever finds out she landed yesterday, she's got to explain why she waited a whole day before getting in touch with him, so she made up this story to cover herself. And Gus—anything she tells him, he'll swallow it."

The Lieutenant thought it over before he spoke. "Why don't you go see Pamela and check out this theory of yours? If you're right we can forget about the whole business. If not, we got a hum-dinger."

Decker swung around slowly, and the swivel chair creaked like it knew what was coming and didn't want any part of it. So Mitch went out without saying another word.

Pamela Dover lived on the second floor of a five-story brick apartment house. Mitch guessed that the rent was around two hundred and that the furniture would be in pretty good taste but strictly run-of-the-mill, on account that was all her pocketbook could stand. And inside the joint it looked like he'd hit it right on the head of the nail.

"I've been investigating that story of yours," he said, to kind of make Pamela feel he didn't see through it and was a hundred percent on her side. "You must have been pretty disappointed at coming home a week early. Any of the others come back with you?"

"Some of them stayed on and paid their own expenses for the week, but I flew back with a Mrs. Mercer. We sat together on the plane, and we shared a taxi from the airport. She lives only a couple of blocks away."

"You don't mind if I check up, do you?" Mitch said. "Because details like that, they can be important."

"Please check up on everything," Pamela said. "I wish you would, because I can hardly believe my own story and I don't see why you should. It's so odd."

"Yeah," Mitch said, and he went to the phone. And this Mrs. Mercer, either she was in on it or else you had to forget that idea about a boy friend, and then where were you, huh?

Mitch ran his finger along the top of the telephone. "You dusted the place?" he asked.

Pamela shook her head. "No. I haven't cleaned yet."

"You go away for a month in this town," Mitch said, "and there's dust. And soot. And all that grime."

"Then somebody must have cleaned up," Pamela said, "because the apartment is spotless."

"You said you left a note for your aunt?" Mitch said.

"Yes, it's still there on the kitchen table. You can look."

Mitch went into the small kitchen and spotted it. A note to Aunt Bessie telling her she was welcome and where she could find the sugar and flour and coffee. Stuff like that.

Mitch examined the note and tried to look like it told him something, which it didn't.

He turned around and watched Pamela for a few seconds. Then he asked a brand-new question.

"Got your last electric bill?" he said.

"It's in the desk," Pamela answered. "It came just before I left for Europe, and I haven't paid it yet. Would you like to see it?"

"If it's handy," Mitch said.

She fished it out of a pigeonhole and brought it to him. He looked at the part that gave the last meter reading, and then he went outside and checked the present reading for her apartment. 312 kilowatt hours had been used during the past month, which meant somebody had probably lived here while Pamela was away.

Mitch returned to the apartment. "Did you leave a light on while you were gone?" he asked.

"No, of course not."

"Or the radio?"

"I disconnected it. Because of the mice. Somebody told me once that you should never leave anything plugged in when you go away, because mice can gnaw the wires and make a short circuit."

"Yeah," Mitch said. Things were getting real screwed up, and he began to think that maybe Pamela was telling the truth.

"Let's go over what happened," Mitch said. "Show me where this guy was sitting, and then I want you to walk in and do exactly what you did and tell me exactly what you said when you got back here from Europe."

She went through the motions without hesitating. It seemed that when she'd walked into the apartment the shades were down on account of the heat and she couldn't see too good. She expected to find Aunt Bessie, and Pamela didn't catch on that anything was wrong until she was in the middle of the room and saw this flabby guy sitting there wearing a red sports shirt with purple sleeves. She gasped and asked him who he was, and he said he was a friend of Aunt Bessie's, that Aunt Bessie was in the bedroom. Only Pamela knew that Aunt Bessie would never have a man around, and certainly not a guy like him.

Pamela said she turned and tried to leave, but the flabby guy got up and shoved her back, and then she ran into the bedroom and picked up the phone to call the police. Only she never got the chance, because the flabby guy ordered her to put the phone down. She swung around and he was standing there in the doorway and he had a gun aimed at her. She screamed, and then he fired at her and she passed out.

That part of it was kind of hard to take. "If the guy fired at you and missed," Mitch said, "then the bullet's got to be around here somewhere. And there's no sign of it in the walls."

"It could have hit the telephone book," Pamela said, pointing to the shelf where she kept it.

Mitch went over and picked up the book and flipped the pages. No slug had gone through them, but he noticed some red lines inside and he showed them to Pamela.

"I have a habit of marking the names of people I call," she said. "That makes it easier to find their numbers. Like my brother's, for instance." She turned the pages to the D's. There was a red line under the name of Robert Dover. "Actually," she said, "he's my half brother. He's an actor, you may have seen him on TV."

"Yeah," Mitch said, never having heard of the guy. "Now the way it looks is, somebody was here in your apartment while you

were away, and it probably wasn't your aunt. Any idea how somebody could get in? What did you do with the key?"

"I left it under the mat, for Aunt Bessie."

"No kidding!" Mitch said. He was kind of shocked that a girl as smart as Pamela didn't know any better, but he explained quietly. "That's the first place a crook will look," he said. "You leave the key under the mat, and you're just asking for trouble."

"I didn't know—"

"Sure, that's okay. Now this brother of yours—he knew you were going away, didn't he?"

"Yes, of course."

"And the travel agent did, too. Who booked you?"

"Leonard Front, at Table Tours. But he wouldn't break into the apartment, he's much too nice."

"This aunt of yours," Mitch said. "You said she was pretty well off. Who gets her money when she dies?"

"Robert and I divide it," Pamela said. "We're her only relatives."

"And this flabby man—can you describe him a little better?"

"I'm afraid not. What I noticed mostly was that funny-looking shirt he was wearing. And the way he looked when I thought he was going to kill me—ugh!"

"Yeah," Mitch said.

He could pretty much smell out the case now. Three people—Pamela, Gus who was going to marry her, and Robert—they were the ones who'd get Bessie Bell's dough, so one or more of those three had a motive for killing her. And if she had been killed for her dough, then it seemed like Pamela had to be in on the thing, on account she was the one who'd told the story. So the next thing was to try and find out from the neighbors if they knew who'd been living in the Dover apartment while Pamela was away.

Mitch drew a big fat zero. The tenants underneath were deaf, they'd heard nothing; the people across the hall were away for the summer; and nobody in the building including the super had any information that would help. Three strikes and out.

Mitch got the address of Pam's half brother, this Robert Dover, and went over to see him. He had a one-room apartment in the Exeter Towers, up on the fourteenth floor, and it looked pretty much the way you'd expect a bachelor who was a TV actor to fix up his place. Robert himself was a dark good-looking guy with a nice pair of shoulders.

After Mitch identified himself, Robert came right out with it. "I guess you've been talking to Pam," he said. "Strangest story I ever heard. She told me about it over the phone and I advised her to call the police. Found out anything?"

"What do you make of the story?" Mitch asked.

Robert frowned. "Frankly," he said, "I just don't know. I only half believe it, because Pam has quite an imagination. When we were kids she was always making things up. There was no limit to what she'd pretend. You'd have thought she'd have gone into acting, instead of me."

"Why would she make this up?" Mitch asked.

Robert shrugged. "How would I know?"

"Seen your Aunt Bessie?" Mitch asked.

"No. I was away when she got here. In case you want to check up, and I suppose you should, I took my vacation from June twenty-ninth to July eighth. Aunt Bessie got here on the second of July, or at least she was supposed to."

"Did you call her when you got back?"

"I phoned her, but there was no answer."

"If she's dead you get half her dough."

"I'm aware of that."

"Where did you go on that vacation of yours?"

"Lake Hallock."

Mitch knew the place. It was a couple of hundred miles north, and if Robert had been there on July 2nd, when Bessie Bell arrived, then it looked like he was clean. So Mitch said, "Where did you stay? And with whom?"

Robert gave the address. He'd been up there with a girl friend, and Mitch took down her name, too. And later on, back at headquarters, Mitch spoke to her and to the Lake Hallock police. Robert Dover had been up there all right; he'd been with this girl of his and he hadn't left the place the entire time.

Mitch figured he was covering the case pretty good, and he told the Lieutenant what he'd found out. The Lieutenant didn't have much new in the way of ideas, except he figured that the only angle that was going to get them anywheres was Bessie Bell.

"Better bring Gus in here," Decker said. "While I talk to him you can look around his garage for a likely place to hide a body. Buried or otherwise."

Gus didn't exactly cotton to the idea of leaving his place in the middle of the day. He said he had work to do and the police could

come out here, couldn't they? They didn't have any cars they'd promised to fix up by five this evening. And what right did they have to boss Gus around? He was here in his garage, and he was staying here.

Mitch merely said that Pam was at headquarters and that the Lieutenant wanted Gus to back up a couple of things she'd said. Otherwise, after that story of hers. . .

Mitch didn't have to finish. You mentioned Pamela's name to Gus, and he came out fighting mad, and on her side. Mitch merely pointed out that the fight was due to take place down at headquarters, so Gus went in a hurry. While Mitch stayed in the garage.

He made friends with Gus's helper and pretended to give with some confidential information, which made it okay for Mitch to snoop around. But the thing was, where were you supposed to find a body in a garage, assuming that there was a body to find? The question stymied him, so he went into the side room that Gus called his office and Mitch sat down at the desk and phoned Amy.

"I been thinking about Joey," Mitch said. "Motivating him—you're right about that, only how do you do it?"

"If he remembered his subjects the way he remembers those baseball statistics," Amy said, "he'd get a hundred in everything."

"We got to make it a kind of game for him," Mitch said. Amy agreed, and that was as far as they got. Furthermore, Mitch didn't find any body, and the Lieutenant didn't get anywheres with Gus.

The next day Mitch started out to see this travel agent, name of Front. Mitch had a hunch that Front could break the case wide-open. Mitch didn't have any particular reason for the hunch. But after you've been investigating for as many years as Mitch had, you get a kind of feeling for where you ought to go and whom you ought to question, and sometimes you're right.

Anyhow, Mitch had this feeling about Front, and on the way to the tourist office Mitch decided to stop off at Pamela Dover's apartment. Again, no special reason for it. He just sort of thought he ought to drop in there.

He parked double in front of the main entrance, and when he went into the lobby there was this guy polishing up the brass of the mail boxes. He was a little guy with big forearms and a big head, and it seemed he worked for the super when the super was away, like now. It was a long time since Mitch had seen anybody

polishing up the brass in a building like this—nobody did that kind of work any more; so Mitch stopped and got to talking with the little guy.

It was just one of those things. Mitch said who he was and he told about how he was working on the Dover case and he asked the little guy what he knew about somebody living here while the Dover dame was in Europe. The little guy said he didn't know anything about that, but along about ten days ago a couple of truck drivers had gone up there and taken out a trunk. A green trunk. Yeah, pretty fair-sized. What trucking company? What kind of a truck? What did the men look like? The little guy didn't know any more. All he could say was, two men had taken out this trunk.

With that piece of information under his hat Mitch went upstairs to see Pam and find out if she had a green trunk. Only she wasn't in, so Mitch decided to skip this Front guy and go back to headquarters instead. There he told Decker about the trunk.

"Brother!" the Lieutenant said. "That's it—the body!"

Mitch didn't argue, but he figured the Lieutenant was going off half cocked, on account Bessie Bell had disappeared on July 2nd and the trunk hadn't left the apartment until about the tenth or the twelfth. So how do you figure that?

Anyhow, Mitch sat down and spent the rest of the morning on the phone, calling express and general hauling companies to see who'd picked up that trunk. He drew one blank after another. In the afternoon he had to be in court—he was due to give some testimony on an assault case he'd handled a couple of months ago. With him away, Decker put Bankhart and Balenky and Perkins, all three of them, on the trunk angle.

Mitch hung around in court all afternoon, but the case dragged on and they didn't even get to him. The D.A. told him to be there in the morning, he'd put Mitch on first thing, it wouldn't take more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Mitch called headquarters, but there was nothing new on the Dover case, so he was free to go home.

Joey was in the house. It was the week he'd decided he was going to be a magician, another Houdini, so instead of playing ball outside, he was practicing with his magic set. He had some kind of a magic flame and he burned a hole in the couch, only Amy didn't find that out until after Joey had gone to bed, which was pretty lucky for the kid.

Like usual these days, Mitch and Amy got to talking about him, and Mitch came up with the idea that if Joey was so interested in magic, maybe they could convince him that a magician had to have a trained memory and ought to know twice as much about everything as anybody else. And that included geography.

Amy latched onto the idea and said there must be some memory tricks, but it was too bad they didn't know a professional magician who could get Joey started. Mitch said yeah, maybe he could look one up. Maybe a theatrical agency. There must be some kind of an agency that handled magicians; they went around and performed at parties and Mitch would see what he could do about it.

He was in court next morning and like he'd suspected, he had to hang around a couple of hours instead of getting put on the stand right off, like the D.A. had promised. So while Mitch was waiting, he got hold of a classified directory and looked up magicians, which weren't listed, and then theatrical agents, and sure enough there was one. The address was in the same building as the Table travel agency, which was a break. Then Mitch was finally called to the stand, and it didn't take more than five minutes and he wasn't even cross-examined.

Around noon he headed out to see this Leonard Front. Naturally he wasn't in. He was having trouble about that tour that went broke, and he was making himself scarce. Anyhow, what with that theatrical agency being upstairs, Mitch went up and asked about magicians.

The guy there, he looked like he hadn't booked anything in the last month if not the last year; his suit was frayed and he had an old tie on with a couple of soup stains halfway down, and he said the magician business was pretty bad. At kid parties these days they turned on the TV and let it go at that. Still, there was one guy that could maybe help Mitch out. He called himself Dr. Memory, and he was pretty much down on his luck. Didn't even have a permanent address, but you could usually locate him at the Hunt Hotel. He slept there most of the time, and they took messages for him.

Mitch went over to the joint. It was a real fleabag, but they said Dr. Memory was there, in Room 107.

Mitch went up and knocked on the door, and this flabby guy, he was wearing a red sports shirt with purple sleeves, he opened up and asked Mitch what he wanted.

Here Mitch had stumbled onto the big break in the case, but he didn't bat an eye. "I got a kid that wants to learn some magic tricks," he said. "They told me maybe you'd teach him."

"I may, or I may not," Dr. Memory said, real nasty. "I teach only the talented."

"There's dough in this," Mitch said.

Dr. Memory tried to draw himself up tall, which he couldn't exactly do on account of that flabbiness. "I," he said, still nasty, "put talent before money."

"I guess you must have inherited a pile," Mitch said.

"I earned it," Dr. Memory said, real stiff.

"Sure. Up in the Dover apartment."

Dr. Memory opened his mouth wide, but he was too scared to talk, so Mitch took out his identification. "Better tell me about it," he said.

"I didn't do anything," Dr. Memory said. There was nothing nasty about him now. He just wanted out. "I was asked to look at a room and to memorize everything. Every detail. I was paid fifty bucks and promised a lot more, but I had to come back in three or four weeks. I'd have to remember every single detail, so that objects could be put back in place."

"And after a few days," Mitch said, "you went back there to see what was happening. The key was under the mat and the apartment was empty, so you moved in. Free rent."

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"You shot at Miss Dover, and that makes it felonious assault."

"I was only trying to scare her, that's all. The gun had blanks—a prop gun."

"And she fainted, and you gave her a strong hypo that put her to sleep. Then you fixed up the room the way it had been. I know all that. So—who hired you?"

That was when there was a knock on the door. Balenky's voice said, "Police. Open up."

Mitch went to the door and yanked it open, and Balenky and Bankhart standing there outside did a double-take.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Balenky said.

"Wrapping up the case," Mitch said. "What are you doing here?"

You couldn't put anything over on Balenky. He was a little guy with gold teeth and he had a cheap cigar in his mouth most of the time, and he saw right through you in a flash.

"You tell us, if you know," he said, grinning. "We got a warrant, and we got a confession. If you're really on top of it, tell us who."

Mitch knew when he was licked. "I hadn't exactly got around to that," he said, "but you can tell the boss I got here first, and leave the rest of it up to me. So—who?"

"We traced the trunk up to Lake Hallock," Balenky said, "and the police up there fished it out of the lake, and there she was. Bessie Bell. And it was a real slick trick, too."

Lake Hallock tied in Robert, which was kind of a surprise to Mitch. He'd expected it to be Gus. Still you don't ever admit you're wrong, so Mitch nodded and said, "Yeah, Robert Dover. That's how I figured it."

"Right," Balenky said. "He had this Dr. Memory look over the apartment right after Pamela left and before Bessie Bell was supposed to get there. Bessie arrived on schedule, July second while Robert was away. He killed her after he got back and shipped the body up to Lake Hallock. He used a fake name and then went there and got the trunk, which he dumped in the lake. The scheme was to restore Pamela's apartment exactly the way it had been, to make it look as if Bessie Bell never got there at all. The plan would have worked, too, and there would have been no evidence that she had ever used the apartment, only Pam came home a week early. I guess you know the rest of it."

Mitch nodded. So that was the case, and it would look as if Mitch had figured it out all by himself, which was okay with him. But what bugged Mitch was, what about Joey? With this Dr. Memory in jail, which was where he was going, who was going to motivate Joey? Because unless he learned his geography, and later on things like Latin and art appreciation, where was he going to get after he grew up?

"Q"

Edward D. Hoch

Captain Leopold Plays a Hunch

"You can't do anything about that, Captain. You can't invent a murder where none exists."

Where none exists . . . Captain Leopold had more than the usual reasons for investigating this particular case. One reason was only fourteen years old . . .

Detective: CAPTAIN LEOPOLD

The day was sunny, with an August warmth that hung in the air like an unseen cloud. It was the sort of day when children's voices carried far in the muggy atmosphere, when the slamming of a screen door or the barking of a dog could be heard throughout the quiet suburban neighborhood of Maple Street.

Out back, beyond the trees that marked the boundary of developed land, a group of boys barely into their teens stood watching while one of them fired a .22 rifle at a row of beer cans they had set up on a log. Presently the mother of the boy with the rifle appeared at the line of trees and shouted for him to stop. He did so, reluctantly, and the other youths drifted away. The boy with the rifle walked slowly back to his mother, his head hanging.

The afternoon settled into a routine of humid stillness, broken only by the rumble of an occasional delivery truck or the crying of a baby. It was nearly an hour later that the screaming started in a house on the next street, beyond the trees and across the open field.

Though the houses were some distance away, the screaming was heard quite clearly on Maple Street.

Lieutenant Fletcher took the call on Captain Leopold's phone, interrupting a department meeting on a recent wave of midtown muggings. Leopold, watching Fletcher's face from the corner of one eye, saw the blood drain from it.

"I'll be right home," Fletcher said and hung up. He turned to Leopold and explained. "I've got to get home, Captain. They think my kid might have killed somebody with his rifle."

"Go ahead," Leopold said. "Call me when you find out what happened."

He went on with the meeting, accepting suggestions from the other detectives and from policewoman Connie Trent, but his mind was on Fletcher. He hoped the news wasn't quite as bad as it had sounded on the phone. He and Fletcher had worked together for so many years that the troubles of one often became the worries of the other.

As soon as the meeting broke up he motioned Connie aside. "Try to find out what happened with Fletcher's son, will you? Let me know as soon as you hear anything."

"Right, Captain." Connie was tall and dark-haired, the brightest addition to Leopold's squad since Fletcher had joined it eleven years earlier. She had beauty and brains, along with a superior arrest record that she had achieved while acting as an undercover narcotics agent. Leopold enjoyed talking to her, enjoyed looking at her deep green eyes and easy smile.

Within fifteen minutes Connie was back in his office. "It's not good, Captain. A man named Chester Vogel, a highschool teacher, was found shot to death in his living room. He was killed by a single .22 bullet that came through a back window of his house. The window faces a vacant lot where Fletcher's son was firing a .22 rifle at just about the time Vogel was killed."

"Damn!" Leopold frowned at his desk. "All right," he said finally. "I'd better get out there."

"Want me to come along?"

"No, Connie. I'm going as a friend, not as a detective." But he smiled and added, "Thanks for offering."

"I'll be here if you need me."

A police car was parked in front of Fletcher's white ranch home on Maple Street. Captain Leopold had been there a few times before—once for a summer cookout in the back yard when he'd felt oddly out of place as the only outsider in a close-knit family group. But he'd always liked Fletcher's wife Carol, a charming intelligent woman whose only fault was her heavy smoking.

Carol saw him coming up the walk now and opened the screen door to greet him. She was short and small-boned, looking far

younger than her 37 years. At that moment she might have been someone's kid sister rather than the mother of a 14-year-old boy. "Thank you for coming, Captain," she said simply.

"How are you, Carol? Is it young Mike?" He knew it was, because their other child was eight-year-old Lisa.

She nodded and pointed to the family room. Leopold went in, edging by the patrolman who stood in the doorway. Young Mike Fletcher was slumped in an armchair, staring at the floor. He did not look up as Leopold entered.

"Hello, Captain," Lieutenant Fletcher said quietly.

"What's the story?"

"I got Mike a .22 rifle last Christmas. I think I told you about it. He wasn't supposed to use it around here. This afternoon Carol caught him out in back with some other kids, shooting at beer cans. She made him come in, and then a while later she heard this screaming. Woman over on Oak Street came home to find her husband shot dead. Some of the neighbors remembered hearing the kids shooting, and the patrolman came over to find out about it."

Leopold looked questioningly at the officer in charge. "What do you think?"

"We'll run a check on the rifle, Captain, but there's not much doubt. Discharging a firearm out here is a violation. We'll have to book him for something or the guy's widow will be on our necks."

Leopold grunted. The man was a deputy sheriff, independent of the city police. He knew Leopold, of course, but there outside the city limits he wasn't impressed by detective captains. Leopold wished Fletcher had kept his family in the city, where he'd been obliged to live until the regulations for municipal employees were relaxed a few years back.

"It was an accident," Leopold pointed out. "And there were other boys involved."

"I did all the shooting," Mike said without looking up. "They were just watching. Don't bring them into it."

Leopold glanced at Lieutenant Fletcher's face and saw the torment in it. "Come on," he said to the boy. "Let's go for a walk out back. You can show me where it happened."

Mike nodded reluctantly and stood up. He was a good-looking boy with fashionably long hair and sideburns, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Leopold knew him only casually, but had always liked him. They went out through the kitchen, walking across the

wide back yard like casual strollers on a summer afternoon. Leopold admired the close-cropped lawn and blooming rosebushes as only an apartment dweller could. He'd never owned a home of his own, even during his brief years of marriage. Now, passing uncomfortably through middle age, he often contemplated the simple joys of life that he had missed.

"Where were you standing when you shot at the cans, Mike?"

"Beyond those trees, Captain Leopold. Our yard ends at the trees, but we all go into the empty lots to shoot and stuff."

"Didn't you know discharging a firearm out here is against the law?"

"Yeah, I guess I knew it."

Leopold followed him between trees and found himself in a great open field overgrown with weeds and scrub brush. Had it not been for the line of houses some 300 yards away on the next street, he might have imagined himself suddenly transported to the countryside.

"Some day they'll build all this up," Mike said, "put a couple of streets through, build lots of houses. It won't be the same."

"Nothing stays the same, Mike." He stooped to pick up a punctured beer can. "Was this where the cans were?"

Mike nodded. "On the log."

Leopold turned and saw Fletcher walking out to join them. In that moment he was not a detective lieutenant or even a close friend. He was only a troubled father. "Find anything?" he asked.

"Beer cans. Bullet holes. What sort of rifle was it?"

"A pump-action .22. He wasn't supposed to fire it around here. I told him, his mother told him."

Leopold stared at the distant line of houses. "That's a long way for a .22 to carry and still have the impact to kill a man." Something was gnawing at him. It was only a hunch, but it was growing. He turned to the boy. "Did you fire toward that house, Mike?"

"No. I didn't even know which was Mr. Vogel's house till the policeman pointed it out."

"You can see the patrol car in the driveway," Fletcher said, pointing out a white ranch home in the middle of the row of houses.

"Did you fire in that direction, Mike?" Leopold asked again.

"No. At least, I don't think so."

"If you were standing here, you would have had to fire a good

two feet to the left of your row of cans, and above them, to come anywhere near that house."

"I might have been wide on a few shots. I don't know."

"Let's just walk over there."

"I don't want to," Mike said.

"All of us do things we don't want to do. Come on."

Mike looked up at his father who nodded. But Fletcher stood back as the two started across the field. Perhaps he felt that his place was with his wife.

"Nice house," Leopold commented when they were almost there.

"Yeah. Oak Street is classier than Maple. I guess that's why they like that big empty lot separating us."

Leopold nodded to the pair of detectives in the living room of the sprawling home. His eyes went to the single hole where the bullet had passed through the window at the rear of the house. "A thousand-to-one chance," a detective said. "It was just bad luck, Captain."

"Seems so. Is Mrs. Vogel home?"

"I'm right here," a hoarse-voiced woman said from the kitchen. She was pale, a little overweight, and perhaps 50 years old. Once she might have been pretty, but today she was only sad-looking and alone.

"I'm Captain Leopold, Lieutenant Fletcher's superior in the city police. This is Mike Fletcher."

Mike stepped forward and tried to speak, but his voice broke when he saw the spots of blood on the white shag carpet at his feet. "No," he managed. "I didn't mean to—"

Mrs. Vogel stared at him with hard unyielding eyes. "You killed my husband," she said quietly. "I hope you rot in prison for it!" Then, turning to Leopold, she added, "Or will being a cop's son get him off?"

Before Leopold could reply, a much younger woman appeared from the kitchen and took Mrs. Vogel's arm. "Come on, Katherine. You've got to lie down. The doctor will be here soon with something to calm you."

"I am calm," Katherine Vogel replied, and indeed she seemed so. Bitter and accusing, but calm. She even glanced down at the watch on her left wrist as if to see what time it was. Nevertheless she allowed the younger woman to lead her off to the bedroom. One of the detectives looked at Leopold and shrugged.

When the young woman returned Leopold thanked her. She acknowledged the words with a nod and said, "I'm Linda Pearson from across the street. Just trying to help."

"She was the first one here after Mrs. Vogel found her husband," a detective explained.

Leopold nodded. "You heard her screams?"

"Yes. It was terrible. She'd been down the street talking to a neighbor and when she returned she found him dead."

"She seems to have calmed down quite a bit now."

"It's all inside. I'm afraid she'll burst with it." Linda Pearson was an attractive young woman, not more than 30, who wore her long blonde hair in twin pigtails that made her seem even younger.

"You knew Mrs. Vogel and her husband well?"

She looked away. "Just as neighbors. I didn't see much of her." She seemed reluctant to say more.

Leopold walked to the rear window and examined the bullet hole. The shot had come from outside, all right, but somehow the whole thing still bothered him. His nagging hunch was back again. "Was Mr. Vogel seated in that chair?"

"I think so," she answered. "He'd fallen onto the rug by the time I got here."

Leopold bent to examine some indentations in the shag rug. The chair seemed to have been moved several inches from its usual position. "Come on, Mike," he said, straightening up. "We'd better be getting back."

In the morning Leopold was restless and irritable. He missed Fletcher, who'd taken the day off to be with Carol and the boy. More than that, he wanted to help, but he didn't really know how. When Connie Trent, filling in for Fletcher, brought his coffee, he looked at her and said, "Damn it, Connie, I want to help Mike!"

She sat down, crossing her legs with a whisper of nylon. "What can you do?"

"That's the trouble. I keep looking for something that isn't there, trying to find proof that he didn't do it. I was awake half the night dreaming up nice neat theories. Vogel having an affair with the girl across the street, his wife finding out, seeing Mike out shooting, and doing a little shooting herself."

"It's an idea," she admitted.

"But there's not a trace of evidence to back it up."

"What about the bullet?"

"Too mashed for a ballistics check. But it was a .22 Long Rifle, the same type Mike was using."

"What will they do to him?"

"He's a juvenile, never in trouble before, and it surely was an accident. He'll probably get off with a lecture from the judge unless Mrs. Vogel raises a stink about his being a detective's son. He did break the law by just firing the rifle. But the thing that bothers me most is the effect on the boy, and on Fletcher and Carol. The bad publicity, the civil suit for damages that Mrs. Vogel is bound to file."

"You can't do anything about that, Captain. You can't invent a murder where none exists."

"I know that, Connie."

"Not even for Fletcher."

He sighed and turned toward the window. "And yet, I have a hunch about Vogel's death—a feeling that the whole thing is just too pat. The chair he was sitting in looked as if it had been moved. Katherine Vogel glanced at her watch once while I was there. Why would a woman whose husband has just been killed be so interested in what time it was?" He paused a moment. "More important, is there substance to any of this or am I merely concerned about Fletcher and his son?"

Connie had no answer, and she gave none.

Leopold parked his car at the corner of Oak Street and walked across to a yard where a man was mowing his lawn. It was late afternoon, almost dinnertime, and in some yards families were preparing to eat outdoors. The odor of charcoal cooking hung heavy in the air.

"You're Bob Aarons?" Leopold asked the man with the power mower.

"That's right." He switched off the mower and frowned.

"I wonder if you could answer a few questions. I'm Captain Leopold, investigating the death of Chester Vogel."

"Terrible thing," the man said, his face relaxing a bit. "I've been a friend of theirs for years." He was tall and middle-aged, with a ready smile when he cared to use it.

"I understand Mrs. Vogel was up here talking with you when it happened."

"About that time, I guess, though the shooting might have

stopped before she arrived. We chatted a few minutes and then she went on home. A few minutes later I heard her screams. I reached the house just after Mrs. Pearson."

Leopold nodded. "Tell me, how did Vogel get along with his wife? Any trouble there?"

"Not that I know of." The smile vanished. "It was the kid on Maple Street that shot him, you know. It wasn't Katherine Vogel."

"I didn't say it was."

"Just because the kid's father is a cop is no reason to let him off the hook."

"Certainly not." Leopold could see he'd get nowhere here. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Aarons. I'll be going now."

He turned to leave, but Aarons called him back. "Look, you might talk to Linda Pearson about it."

"What could she tell me?"

The man's face was blank. "Ask her."

"Come on, Mr. Aarons."

The man stared down at the grass. "In the house, right after I got there, Mrs. Pearson said Katherine had killed him. That was before we knew what really happened, of course."

"Of course. Thanks, Mr. Aarons. I'll talk to her."

Linda Pearson came to the door at his first ring. He identified himself and reminded her of their meeting the previous afternoon, but she still seemed reluctant to let him in. "My husband's at the funeral parlor with Katherine Vogel. I'm alone with the baby."

"I'll only take a few minutes."

"Oh, very well!" She unlatched the screen door. "A woman can't be too careful these days."

Her house was a duplicate of the Vogel place across the street, though the décor carried out a more contemporary theme. "You were the first one over there after Katherine Vogel screamed, I believe."

"That's right. Mr. Aarons was right behind me."

"I was just talking to him. He said when you first saw the body you thought Mrs. Vogel had killed him."

"I—that was in the heat of the moment. It didn't mean anything."

"Sometimes the truth comes out in the heat of the moment."

"That wasn't the truth. The boy on the next street killed him."

"Why did you think it might have been Katherine Vogel?"

"I don't know." She glanced away, searching for the right words.

"Mrs. Pearson, forgive me, but were you having an affair with Chester Vogel?"

"Certainly not!" Her eyes blazed with fury. "You're sounding just like her!"

"Yes?" He smiled slightly. "More words in the heat of the moment?"

She started to turn away, then faced him again. "All right, I'll tell you. Katherine Vogel thought we were having an affair. She accused him of it and warned me to stay away from him. But I swear to you, there wasn't a word of truth in it! She's a suspicious old bitch who minds everybody else's business. He told me once that she threatened to kill him if she caught him fooling around."

The fury of her attack surprised Leopold. "Do you know if Vogel owned a gun of any kind?" he asked.

She nodded. "A target pistol. I saw it once. He kept it in the basement."

"A .22?"

"I don't know that much about guns."

Maybe, Leopold thought. Just maybe his hunch was beginning to pay off. "Thank you, Mrs. Pearson. You've been a big help."

Upstairs the baby started to cry.

Leopold stopped for a sandwich and then drove over to the funeral parlor in the early evening. It was an imposing colonial structure in keeping with middle-class suburban architecture. Leopold was surprised to find Fletcher lingering near the doorway as if awaiting some call.

"I thought I should come over," he explained. "I tried to get Mike to come, too, but he wouldn't."

"It's a terrible thing for him," Leopold said. His eyes were scanning the assembled mourners. "Is Linda Pearson's husband still around?"

"Dark blue suit. Straight ahead."

Harry Pearson was tall and virile, if somewhat older than his youthful wife. When Leopold motioned him aside to ask about Katherine Vogel, he drew in his breath and answered with some anger, "This is hardly the place for it, Captain."

Leopold glanced at the flower-draped coffin and agreed. "All right, let's go outside."

It was still daylight as they strolled across the blacktopped parking area behind the building. Harry Pearson swatted at a mosquito and asked, "Now, what was it you wanted?"

"What were Mrs. Vogel's relations with her husband?"

"Good, as far as I know."

"I've heard differently. I've heard she was suspicious of him, jealous of other women, and that she even threatened to kill him."

He squinted at Leopold. "Have you been talking to my wife?"

"Among others."

"Well, there's no truth in it. Katherine Vogel is a fine woman. A detective's son killed Chester; and there's nothing else you can make out of it."

Lieutenant Fletcher came out the back door at that moment, and Leopold knew he'd heard Pearson's last sentence. Fletcher merely nodded and kept going to his car. Leopold watched him in silence and then said, "All right, Mr. Pearson. Sorry to have taken your time."

He turned and followed Fletcher, catching him at the car. "Want to stop for a beer?"

Fletcher turned to him, his eyes pained. "Captain, I know what you're trying to do, believe me. But it's no good. We can't make a murder case out of this. Mike killed him, that's all there is to it."

"Mike says he didn't fire any shots in that direction. I believe him, Fletcher."

"Then what happened?"

"She heard the shooting, got her husband's target pistol out of the basement, and shot him through the window herself."

"Without any neighbors seeing her?"

Leopold knew he was being unreasonable. "All right," he agreed finally. "Let me talk to ballistics again in the morning."

Fletcher managed a weak smile. "Sure, Captain. I appreciate everything you're trying to do. So does Carol."

Leopold nodded. They shook hands like two old friends who had just encountered each other briefly. Then Fletcher got into his car and drove away.

In the morning Leopold went down to ballistics and talked to Sergeant Wolfer, a grumpy little man who was an expert at what he did. "No chance for identification, Captain," he said immediately. "The slug was too badly mashed."

"But it was a .22, the same as Mike Fletcher was firing?"

"That's right—a .22 Long Rifle."

"A rifle bullet?"

The little man sighed. "Come on, Captain! Do I need to lecture you on ballistics this morning? Most .22 rifles and target pistols use the same ammunition. The majority of target pistols made today can fire .22 Long Rifle slugs."

Leopold persisted. "What about penetration? Mike's bullet would have traveled nearly three hundred yards."

"The bullet in Vogel's head penetrated only about an inch—just far enough to get mashed and drive some bone splinters into his brain. I'm reading from the autopsy report now."

"Is that consistent with a shot from Mike's gun?"

"Within reasonable limits. Maybe there was a little extra powder in the cartridge."

"A .22 target pistol fired at close range would have penetrated deeper?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Damn it, Wolfer, I'm trying to conduct an investigation!"

"And I'm trying to help you. Many things can cause a bullet to lose penetrating power. The cartridges might have been old and damp, for one thing. Or the bullet could have been fired through something."

"Like a pillow, to deaden the sound of the shot?"

Wolfer nodded. "Like that."

"If somebody had a target pistol down in the basement for a long time, with old ammunition, and brought it up and fired it through a pillow, would it penetrate about the same distance as a bullet from a .22 rifle fired nearly three hundred yards away?"

Sergeant Wolfer thought about it. "Maybe, maybe not."

Leopold sighed and went back upstairs to his office. It was going to be that sort of day. Perhaps Fletcher was right. Perhaps he should forget the whole thing.

Young Mike Fletcher was waiting with his father in Leopold's office. "Captain, my dad wanted me to come see you," he said with hesitation.

"Sure, Mike. What is it?"

"He told me what you're trying to do for me and all that and I sure appreciate it, but—"

"But what?"

Mike hesitated, and Leopold repeated his question.

"Well, I told you I didn't remember shooting in that direction."

"Yes?"

"It wasn't true, Captain. I do remember. I remember the exact shot that did it. One of the kids accidentally hit my arm, and my aim went way off. I remember praying that it wouldn't hit anyone. It was high and to the left, right toward Vogel's house."

"I see," Leopold said.

Fletcher cleared his throat. "I thought you should know, Captain."

"Yes. Of course."

"Thanks again for what you tried to do for me," Mike said.

Leopold nodded. He waited until the boy left and then he said, "Get me some coffee, will you, Fletcher? I missed you yesterday. Connie had to do my running for me."

"Sure, Captain."

When they were settled over coffee Leopold asked, "When's Vogel's funeral?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Leopold sipped his coffee. It should have been over, but it wasn't. "Why did Mrs. Vogel glance at her wrist watch when I was there?"

"You're still on it, aren't you? Even after talking to Mike?"

"I just want to know why the time interested her so much at that moment, with her husband dead."

"Maybe the time didn't interest her."

"Why else does someone look at their watch?"

Fletcher thought about that. "To see if it's going?"

Leopold sat up straight. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that? I forgot to take my watch off on the pistol range one day, and when I was firing lefthanded the shock of the recoil stopped it."

"But why would a right-handed person fire a gun left-handed?"

"If she was holding something else in her right hand, Fletcher—something like a pillow to muffle the shot!"

"Captain—"

Leopold got to his feet. "I'd better talk to Mrs. Vogel once more."

She answered the door dressed in black and looking as grim and defensive as he remembered her. "Captain Leopold, isn't it? I understand you've been questioning my neighbors."

"Only routine," he said. "May I come in?"

"Routine when a detective's son shoots somebody?"

"May I come in?" he repeated.

"For a moment. I have to be leaving for the funeral parlor."

He followed her into the living room, carefully avoiding the stains on the white rug. He noticed that the window had been repaired, with the fresh pane of glass still bearing the window company's sticker. He walked close enough to see the name: Empire Glass Company.

"They fixed it this morning, if that's what you're looking at."

"Fast work." His eyes had gone to the wall opposite the window, to a spot that had been hidden behind the chair on his previous visit. He could see a mark as if something had chipped the paint.

"Since when are city police concerned with a suburban crime, Captain Leopold?"

He ignored her question as he examined the wall. "Mrs. Vogel, I'll admit this started out only as a hunch, but it's getting to be more than that now. Mike Fletcher's bullet could have broken your window and hit the wall right here, leaving this mark before it fell, spent of all power, to the rug."

"That mark was caused a month ago when I tipped over a table while cleaning."

"I think you saw your opportunity, Mrs. Vogel, and you took it. Perhaps your husband even kidded about how the bullet could have killed him if he'd been sitting in his favorite chair. Somehow you kept him from phoning the police right away, maybe saying you'd call the boy's parents first. Then you went down to the basement and got out his old .22 target pistol."

"Chester got rid of that long ago."

He ignored the interruption and went on. "You shot him through the head with it, muffling the sound with a pillow held in your right hand. Later, while I was here, you glanced at the wrist watch on your left hand to make sure the pistol's recoil hadn't stopped it."

"Captain, if you repeat those charges I'll sue you for every cent you own!"

"That isn't much," Leopold said with a grim smile. "I'm only concerned about the boy, Mrs. Vogel. I don't want him going through life thinking he killed a man."

"Get out of my house. I've listened to you long enough."

Leopold felt a wave of helplessness wash over him. There was no way to prove it, no way even to prove to himself that his

hunch was the truth. "What about the chair? You moved it to line up with the bullet hole in the wall, now you've moved it back."

"Is it a crime to move one's furniture around?"

"Where's the broken window?"

"The glass company took it. There's no plot, Captain. It's all in your mind—every bit of it!"

And perhaps it was. That was the damnable part of it—perhaps she was right. "All right," he said finally. "I'll be going."

She followed him to the door and slammed it behind him. He stood on the stoop for a moment, feeling old, and then started down the walk to his car. At least he could check on the glass. If he was going to do anything about Katherine Vogel, he'd need the windowpane to line up the bullet hole with the mark on the wall.

He drove over to the Empire Glass Company, a low cinderblock building in a nearby shopping plaza. The man at the counter remembered the Vogel job. "Sure, I replaced it just this morning."

"She said you took the old window," Leopold told the man.

"Yeah, it's in the back. Heck, the bullet hole was just in one corner. We can cut it up for small panes."

"I think I'll want that window," Leopold said. Then another thought struck him "When did Mrs. Vogel call you to fix it? She didn't waste any time, did she?"

"No, the call came in day before yesterday, just after it happened, I guess. Only it was the guy that called, not her."

Something churned in Leopold's stomach. "Guy? What guy?"

"The husband, Mr. Vogel. The one that died. I talked to him myself."

"You're telling me it was Chester Vogel who called to report the broken window?"

"Sure."

Leopold spoke very quietly. "But how could he have done that if he was killed by the same bullet that broke the window?"

The man shrugged. "I didn't read the details. I just knew he was dead."

"I think you'd better come with me," Leopold said. "Right now."

When Katherine Vogel opened the door Leopold said simply, "I just found out what your husband was doing while you were in the basement looking for his target pistol."

Her eyes went from Leopold to the repairman. Leopold could see from her sagging face that it was all over.

Jacob Hay

Stoltzfuss' Revenge

How in the name of Saint Edgar can we describe this story or justify its inclusion in a detective-mystery anthology? Well, dear reader, we won't even try. Either you'll love it, and chuckle deep, or you'll hate it and want to write a scathing letter to the Editor. Naturally, we hope you'll chuckle—better still, laugh out loud; if you don't, please be forbearing. Spare the Editor, and consider his decision to publish this story a wild impulse, the kind he rarely succumbs to. Nevertheless, you'll have to admit, this is the damndest story! . . .

Isaac Stoltzfuss had seen many changes and put up with much since his boyhood on the Stoltzfuss family farm, which lies roughly a dozen miles to the east of the prosperous city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Being a good Amishman, he had managed to avoid many of the perils of mid-Twentieth Century life, including electricity and the internal combustion engine.

He had endured stoically the indignities of the tourist invasion of the Pennsylvania Dutch country which mounted from a trickle to a torrent in the years following World War II; had seen himself and his coreligionists reduced to quaint, cast-iron figurines, and their dialect mocked in untold tons of quaint, cast-iron trivets that said, "Bump. It don't bell," and "We grow too soon old und too late schmart." He, his beard, his horse and his buggy and his wife and his family had suffered through ten thousand surreptitious snapshots, most of them in front of the bank at Intercourse, Pa.

But the Russian satellite, as described in the pages of the Lancaster *New Era*, was just too much.

According to the *New Era's* story, the satellite in its heavenly orbit passed directly over Lancaster County, flying west to east, roughly once every week, taking aerial photographs of the ground as it hurtled along. And so excellent was the definition of the photographs that a skilled photo-interpreter could even distin-

guish an automobile speeding along a highway.

Tourists and their myriad cameras could be borne, and if you spotted them in time you could always duck your head beneath your broad-brimmed black hat. But how could you avoid having a graven image, so sternly forbidden by Amish doctrine, made of yourself by a robot photographer in Space?

You couldn't, and Heaven only knew how many graven images of Isaac Stoltzfuss and his family the Russians had already accumulated in their files.

The situation was intolerable and insoluble.

Isaac had gone to the trouble of visiting the *New Era's* office in Lancaster, and there the editor had assured him that the information came direct from NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. No, the editor could not say whether the Russian satellite flew directly over the Stoltzfuss farm, but since it was reported to photograph a strip of ground some 100 miles across, the chances were that Isaac's farm was in the pictures.

And no, the editor could not answer Isaac's angry question as to why the United States did not shoot this intruder out of the skies, but he did go so far as to surmise that it might be that if we did it to one of theirs, they might do the same thing to one of ours. This served only to buttress Isaac's inborn conviction that if God had wanted man to fly He would have given him wings, but did nothing to eliminate the graven-image problem.

Now those of the Amish persuasion are stout believers in the teachings and admonitions of the Old Testament, and while they cleave to the ways of peace they do not reject out of hand the doctrine of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, ill though it accords with the idea of turning the other cheek.

Isaac discussed the problem with his neighbor, Aaron Detweiler, who had not read the newspaper account of the satellite, but who was equally outraged. Aaron Detweiler suggested that they consult the pages of *Baer's Almanack*, which is published in Lancaster and is the county's lay Bible, but withdrew his proposal when Isaac pointed out that with all these new satellites flying around the Heavens, no almanack, not even *Baer's*, could any longer be considered reliable. In the end Aaron declared that since there was no possible way for Isaac to secure an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the only feasible alternative was to turn the other cheek. This, however, failed to satisfy Isaac.

"No, by Gott!" he exclaimed angrily, taking the Lord's name in

vain for the first time in more than two decades. "You chust mind wunst, Aaron Detweiler, I'll think of something."

There was another annoying aspect to the satellite's existence. At his father's knee Isaac had learned to read the sky as a routine part of his day-to-day farming operations. A long shrewd look at the sky would tell him when to plant or when to harvest, when to hitch up the buggy for a trip to town, or when to leave it in the barn. This he could no longer do with a clear conscience. Before he had known about the satellite, any graven images it may have made of him were without his knowledge and could not, therefore, be considered sinful. But now he *knew*, and from here on in, any graven images could and certainly would be set down in the Heavenly books against him.

For a few days Isaac tried looking at the sky's reflection in a mirror nailed to the side of his corn crib, but it just wasn't the same, and on the fifth day he had hitched up his buggy and was halfway to Blue Ball when he ran into a cloudburst.

On the sixth day Isaac acted. He did not tell his wife of a quarter of a century, Rebecca, what he had in mind. Instead he said simply, "I'll be in the south pasture for a spell."

Then he went out to his vast red barn and harnessed Peter, Paul, Luke, and Mark, four of the finest Percherons in all Lancaster County, to his gang plow and set out for the south pasture, a three-acre strip of the least fertile land on his farm, for all that it was admirably level.

It took Isaac the best part of an hour, for he was a notably careful plowman and enjoyed a considerable reputation for the arrow straightness of his furrows and the skilled curves of his contours. When he finished he paused in his labors, looked upon what he had wrought, and found it good. The long vertical and the two horizontals, the lower one shorter than the higher one, covered about one third of the first acre, just about the right size for the job at hand.

This done, he took his reins once again in hand and, urging Peter, Paul, Luke, and Mark forward with a cheery grunt—for his heart was joyful in his task—Isaac guided them and the plow into the first of two long verticals, side by side, the lower ends of which he proceeded to connect with a deftly executed curve.

There followed a great sweeping curve, covering yet another third of an acre by itself, and this in turn was followed by another long vertical, to which were joined two diagonals, one slightly

longer than the other. That took care of K and the rest of the morning.

Having got the hang of the technique, Isaac finished off his giant YOU well before Rebecca rang the farmhouse bell summoning him to supper—in time, in fact, for Isaac to climb a tall maple tree at the western end of the south pasture to insure that he hadn't misspelled anything. He hadn't. His message was brief and to the point, and would probably lose little in translation.

Apart from Isaac, the first person to spy his handiwork was the captain of Trans-Pennsylvania Airlines Flight 102, daily from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. For the first time in an unblemished career, the captain violated standard operating procedures to turn his plane in a tight circle over Isaac's south pasture so that his second-in-command might verify his improbable sighting.

"Well, I'll be damned!" was the second pilot's immediate reaction to the succinct direction plowed into the rich farmland. "Some crazy guy must be really mad."

Not anger, but rather a great inner peace filled Isaac Stoltzfuss as he sat down to Rebecca's vast dinner that evening.

Wishing to maintain his record without blemish, the captain of Flight 102 did not mention Isaac's message in his routine flight report, since to have done so would have been to risk immediate groundings for psychiatric examination and possibly the end of an otherwise brilliant career.

The captain of Trans-Pennsylvania's morning Flight 101 was cut from a different bolt of cloth, as it were, and saw his duty clear the following day. But even he could not bring himself to put down Isaac's exact words. Instead he wrote, "There is an obscenity in a field approximately ten miles due east of Lancaster, Pa." He, of course, was immediately grounded for psychiatric examination and was later allowed to resign.

Three days afterward another cloudburst struck Lancaster County, and in a trice Isaac's prodigious labor was undone, washed away by the force of the rain.

The second time, his technique perfected, Isaac plowed his message in German script which had the effect of giving it a well-nigh Biblical force, like the wrathful commandment of an Old Testament prophet.

And still Rebecca did not know. Nor did any of Isaac's neighbors, since the south pasture lay well within the boundaries of his farm and in sight of no road or house.

But the arm of the FAA, the Federal Aviation Administration (or perhaps it was the CAB, the Civil Aeronautics Board) is long, and in due course the report of the Trans-Pennsylvania captain of Flight 101, with its curious notation, reached official hands. The consequence was an aerial inspection by a team of government experts whose members were thus enabled to see exactly what, presumably, the Russian satellite was able to see.

The question was then raised as to why none of the passengers aboard the Trans-Pennsylvania planes that flew the skylane over the Stoltzfuss farm had seen Isaac's exhortation, and a check of the flight logs disclosed that Trans-Pennsylvania's planes transited the farm at precisely the time when the stewardesses were serving mid-morning or mid-afternoon snacks to their passengers.

Returning to Washington, the inspection team produced their eyewitness reports, confirmed by photographs.

The aerial inspection was followed by one on the ground, at which time it was discovered that Isaac's message was absolutely invisible at ground level. It looked, in point of fact, pretty much like any other plowed field. Isaac, who had cheerfully accompanied the inspectors (he had explained them away to Rebecca as representatives of the Department of Agriculture), showed them how to read it by climbing the maple tree. For this inspection the team had been augmented by a government attorney who had been raised on a farm in Iowa.

"Neatest damned furrows I've ever seen," declared the attorney when he had climbed down from the tree. "And, gentlemen, the fact is that I couldn't find anything anywhere that prohibits a man from dirty plowing. If Mr. Stoltzfuss here wants to plow 'The President Is a Horse's Bottom' in his pasture, there isn't a law I know of that says he can't."

"That's real nice to know already," said Isaac, "but I'd never let them Russians know how I feel still." This remark necessitated his explaining why he had plowed his message to begin with.

"I'll say this for you, Stoltzfuss," said the attorney, deeply moved at the conclusion of Isaac's indignant explanation, "you may be crazy, but you're my kind of patriot."

Inevitably, such is the sad state of security in the nation's capital, word of the inspection team's confidential final report, which recommended only that Trans-Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-Pittsburgh flight path should be rerouted some miles to the north, was leaked to the press, and for some weeks after a flotilla of pri-

vate planes, hired by major newspapers, magazines, and news syndicates, foreign and domestic, zoomed over Isaac's farm, invariably buzzing the south pasture for close-up shots, none of which, of course, was suitable for reproduction in publications intended for family reading.

Even in print, Isaac's message could not be repeated; it could only be hinted at in euphemism.

Having offered his explanation to the only people who counted, Isaac resolutely refused to discuss the matter further with the press, and was much dismayed by all the unwelcome attention and publicity he had engendered. He was further downcast by the furious tongue lashing he received from Rebecca when she discovered the two words he had plowed, for she held strong views on the impiety of foul language and the sanctity of procreation.

Matters were still further exacerbated when the Stoltzfuss farm was swamped by an insatiable horde of curious sightseers, and the bark of the maple tree overlooking the message was swiftly worn away by eager climbers. The ultimate indignity, as Isaac saw it, came in the form of a citation from a group of noted New York artists and intellectuals who described Isaac's message as the finest work of earth sculpture produced during the year.

In the end Isaac's Amish friends threatened him with the dreadful punishment known as "shunning" unless the offending words were removed from his property. Shunned, Isaac would be, in effect, a living corpse, a sinner past redemption. So Isaac hitched Peter, Paul, Mark, and Luke to his gang plow and went out to the south pasture to erase his words once and for all time.

It is highly unlikely that Isaac ever learned that a few months later a team of photo-interpreters from the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), examining the results of an American spy satellite that had passed over, among other places, a Soviet tracking station some miles north of Irkutsh, plainly saw, trampled in the form of enormous Cyrillic letters into the virgin Siberian snow, the Russian equivalent of "Same to you, fella."

"Q"

Joyce Porter

Dover and the Dark Lady

It has been said that S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance was so popular in his heyday because readers loved to hate him. Perhaps Joyce Porter's Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover belongs, in his own way, to that unusual 'tec tradition. Here is a novelet about the ungainly, unwanted, uncomfortable man from Scotland Yard, and you'll find the unappetizing Dover up to his old tricks. The Abominable Showman still snarls, scowls, growls, glares, snaps, scoffs, barks, yelps, grumbles, grouses, roars, and bellows; he still is the abusive, irascible, boorish, rude, crude, bumbling bloodhound who manages—in his own way—to get the job done, and ultimately with credit to his noble calling . . .

Detective: INSPECTOR WILFRED DOVER

66 **S**trewth!" puffed Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover, grinding to an exhausted halt on the half landing. "You'd think they'd put a ruddy lift in, wouldn't you?"

Detective Sergeant MacGregor, although by no means incapacitated by the ascent of one short flight of stairs, paused and watched with well-concealed exasperation as his lord and master propped himself up against the handrail. Fat old pig!

"Besides," said Dover, who would have made the Garden of Eden ring with his complaints if he had chanced to be there before the Fall, "having to look at dead bodies before breakfast turns my stomach."

Somewhere in the distance a church clock wheezily struck ten.

Sergeant MacGregor managed to force an encouraging smile. "It's only up these next few steps, sir," he said, and got a malevolent scowl for his pains.

Higher up, outside the closed door of Flat 2, a young policeman impassively observed the sluggish progress of his betters. Although he had never seen him before, he recognized Dover without the least hesitation. That ungainly bulk, clothed in its shabby overcoat and topped by a ridiculous bowler hat, could belong only to Scotland Yard's most unwanted detective. The young constable, not believing for a moment that the old devil could be as awful as police gossip painted him, nevertheless braced himself.

"You waiting for a bus, laddie?"

The snarl with which these words were uttered was so unnecessarily vicious that it took the wind out of the young policeman's sails. "No, sir," he gulped and was mortified to find himself turning pink. The hand which he had been about to snap up to the brim of his helmet now dangled uselessly in midair. With an effort he pulled it down and flung the door open.

Dover shouldered his way past. "Fool!" he growled.

Inside the flat the scene of intense professional activity which met Dover's eyes was not calculated to ruffle his ill humor. Work in any shape or form was anathema to him and the sight of all those solemn-faced men measuring, photographing, and puffing out little squirts of fingerprint powder was enough to upset him for the rest of the day.

A uniformed Inspector came hurrying across from the far side of the large sitting room. He was bustling full of his own importance and stepped nimbly over the sheet-covered corpse which lay in the middle of the carpet.

The formalities were soon dispensed with. They usually were with Dover who was already looking around for somewhere to take the load off his feet.

The Inspector, cut short before he'd got more than a couple of words out, suggested the bedroom and the two of them, trailed by MacGregor, picked their way across the sitting room.

"Ooh, that's more like it," sighed Dover, sinking gratefully onto the bed. "My feet are crippling me!" He didn't let his relief get the better of him, though. He glared up at the somewhat disconcerted Inspector. "Well, come on, spit it out, man! I haven't got all day to waste sitting around here, if you have."

"Er—no, sir."

Dover blew impatiently down his nose. "Who's the stiff?"

The Inspector shot a bewildered glance at MacGregor but he got no help there. "George Andrew Willoughby, sir." The Inspector

stopped as he became aware that Dover was concentrating most of his attention on unlacing his boots. Dover looked up.

The Inspector gave a nervous smile and continued, "Age, forty-three. Divorced. Living here alone. Death was the result of a gunshot wound in the left temple, fired at close quarters. We found a German Luger on the floor beside the body, and it would appear that was the weapon used."

Dover abandoned his bootlaces and looked up with a smile actually wreathing his pasty face. "Suicide," he announced with every appearance of satisfaction.

The Inspector failed to hide his dismay. "Oh, I think that's a little premature, sir."

"Who's interested in what you think?"

"There are one or two points which—"

"Somebody else's fingerprints on the gun?"

"There are no fingerprints on the gun, sir."

"So, there you are!" trumpeted Dover. "Suicide!"

The Inspector was one of those men who never know when they're beaten. Against all odds he still thought that reason, common sense, and cold hard logic would prevail. "The gun had been wiped clean, sir. It didn't even have Mr. Willoughby's fingerprints on it. And then there's the woman's handkerchief we found under the body and the fact that the front door was—"

"Here, hold on!" Dover's face had already slipped back into its habitual sullen expression. "One ruddy thing at a time! What's this about a handkerchief?"

The Inspector was gratified by such a display of interest. "It's in the next room, sir. I'll get it, shall I?"

Dover didn't bother to wait until the Inspector had closed the door behind him. He sneered, then swung round to vent his spite on his sergeant. "What's the matter with you?" he inquired. "Lost the use of your legs or something?"

MacGregor had turned the other cheek so often it's a wonder his head hadn't come unscrewed. "No, sir," he said meekly.

"Well, get out there and start having a look round, you block-head! If we're not careful we'll have that oaf solving the case under our blooming nose."

"Yes, sir."

The paths of MacGregor and the uniformed Inspector crossed in the bedroom doorway. Each carefully avoided catching the other's eye.

The handkerchief which had been found under the dead man's body had been sealed in a transparent envelope. Dover examined it sourly. "It's got some initials on it," he said, making the statement sound like an accusation.

"Yes, sir. T.H., we think, but of course with these fancy monograms you can't always be sure."

Dover dropped the handkerchief negligently onto the bed. "Girl friend?"

"Well, that's just the point, sir." The Inspector took a couple of steps forward in his eagerness. "There is definitely a woman connected with the case. The spare bedroom, sir, is—"

One of Dover's hobbies was to cut people down to size. He now choked the Inspector off without a qualm. "Which side of the head did you say he shot himself in?"

"The left, sir." The Inspector raised his left hand and pointed the fingers like a gun at his temple.

Dover regarded him morosely. "Left-handed, was he?"

The Inspector almost wept with relief. He'd begun to think Dover was congenitally incapable of putting two and two together. "Not as far as we can ascertain, sir. The way his possessions are arranged on his desk and in the bathroom would seem to indicate—"

"How long since he snuffed it?"

A lesser man would have lost heart and even the Inspector was beginning to feel mauled. At the very minimum he felt he had the right to be treated with common courtesy. After all, this crime, whatever it was, was none of his business. He'd simply come along with the advance party just to keep an eye on things until—God help us!—the experts arrived on the scene.

The uniformed Inspector wasn't a detective and, if the specimen lolling in front of him like a hippopotamus in a mud hole was an example, he was damned glad he wasn't. He'd done his best to be helpful because he knew that speed was extremely important in the early stages; but if his assistance wasn't going to be appreciated—

"Cat got your tongue?"

The Inspector gritted his teeth. "The police surgeon thinks he's been dead about twelve hours, sir. Say somewhere between nine o'clock last night and one this morning. He may be able to narrow it down when he's done the post-mortem. Would you like to have a word with him, sir?"

"Not bleeding likely," said Dover. He plumped up his pillows and yawned an enormous yawn. "And you can push off, too."

"You don't require me any longer sir?"

"Never," observed Dover as he let his eyelids droop over his piggy eyes, "wanted you in the first place."

But there is no rest for the wicked. Less than ten minutes after the Inspector had departed, Sergeant MacGregor came bursting in, bubbling over with an enthusiasm that made Dover's bones ache.

MacGregor tactfully ignored the fact that his noisy entrance had awakened Dover from a refreshing doze. "Sir, I really think we have a case of murder here!"

"Is that so?" said Dover bleakly. Trust MacGregor to put a blight on things.

"It's the way he was shot, sir. If he'd done it himself, he'd have had to use his left hand and—"

"Queen Anne's dead!" growled Dover unpleasantly.

"Eh? Oh, I see, sir." MacGregor counted slowly up to ten under his breath and tried again. After all, a crime had been committed and somebody had to cajole Dover into trying to solve it. "I think, sir, that there may be a woman involved."

Dover screwed his face up in disgust.

"And it's not only that lady's handkerchief, sir. Have you heard about the other bedroom?"

"What about it?" asked Dover cautiously.

"It's a woman's room, sir. Full of frocks and dresses and there's make-up and ladies' shoes and frou-frou and everything. The late Mr. Willoughby must have had a steady girl friend."

Dover scowled. "Who found the body?"

"Oh, that was Willoughby's ex-wife, sir. Apparently she called round this morning and—"

"Where is she?"

MacGregor was more than a little surprised at this sudden display of interest but he was anxious to encourage any spark of initiative Dover might show. "She's in the flat opposite, sir. They thought it'd be better for her to wait in there until you were ready to see her. She's pretty upset, I gather."

"Gerumph!" said Dover.

MacGregor tried to translate this into some expression of human desire. "Shall I fetch her in here, sir?"

Dover, however, wasn't as big a fool as he looked and, where his

own comfort was concerned, he could weigh the pros and cons with amazing speed. He was not the one to go to the mountain if there was the faintest hope that the mountain could be brought to him; but he was also an astute student of human nature. Here was a shocked and distressed woman being looked after by kindly neighbors. The least the neighbors could do was offer the poor soul something in the way of light refreshment.

With a grunt Dover heaved himself to his feet and settled his bowler hat firmly on his head. "No, we'll go and see her, laddie."

Mrs. Thelma Lucian had, indeed, been extremely shaken by the gruesome discovery of her former husband's body and nobody raised any objection when Dover suggested that further supplies of cakes and coffee would be a great comfort. As soon as they arrived Dover began tucking in happily while MacGregor led Mrs. Lucian carefully through her story.

"Now, madam, you say you arrived at Mr. Willoughby's flat at about nine o'clock this morning. Were you calling by appointment or was it just a casual visit?"

"Well, both, really," said Mrs. Lucian, twisting a sodden handkerchief nervously in her fingers. "You see, Will—that's what everybody calls him—Will rang me up last night and said he wanted to see me right away. Well, I was absolutely dumfounded, you see, because I don't think I've seen him more than twice since we were divorced ten years ago. I'm surprised he even knew where to find me."

"What time was this?" asked MacGregor.

"Oh, about ten o'clock last night, I think. It was quite late."

"Why did he want to see you?"

"Well, he didn't say. I asked him, of course, but he just said it was terribly important and I simply must come over and see him right away."

"So you did?"

Mrs. Lucian was a pretty woman in her middle thirties with large dark eyes. She opened them wide now. "No, I didn't. I kept trying to tell Will that I didn't think I could but he just wouldn't listen. I mean, it was such a surprise, you see, after all these years. And, then, I was in the house by myself—my present husband's abroad at the moment—and frankly I simply didn't feel like turning out in the middle of the night and trailing halfway across London on my own just because Will had taken it into his head to snap his fingers."

MacGregor nodded his head sympathetically. "Did Mr. Wiloughby seem distressed when he phoned you?"

"You mean, did he sound as though he was going to commit suicide?" Mrs. Lucian was not unintelligent. "No, I wouldn't say so. He was certainly extremely worked up about something, but he sounded—well—angry more than anything else. I couldn't make him out at all, really."

Out of the corner of his eye MacGregor saw Dover reaching for another slice of fruit cake. "And this morning?"

Mrs. Lucian sighed. "Well, in the bright harsh light of day I began to feel a bit guilty. I mean—" She shrugged delicately. "Anyhow, I decided to come round. I rang the bell several times but there was no answer. Then I knocked."

"Yes?"

"My knocking pushed the door open. It wasn't locked. I called Will's name but there was no reply, of course, so I went in and found him lying there on the floor."

"Was the light on?" MacGregor put the question casually but that didn't make it unimportant. Even Dover stopped munching to listen to the answer.

"No."

Dover's nose twitched in annoyance. Even he knew that suicides virtually never killed themselves in the dark. He took another large bite of the fruit cake. Just his blooming luck!

MacGregor went smoothly on with his questions. "Did you touch him?"

"No. I knew he was dead." Mrs. Lucian shuddered. "His eyes were open. Then I saw the gun on the floor beside him and I realized he must have shot himself. It was horrible. I felt I was to blame though I couldn't really see why." She struggled to control her feelings. "I picked the phone up and dialed 999 and then I waited outside on the landing until the police came."

"Do you know if your ex-husband owned a gun?"

"Yes, he did. A German one he brought back from the war. I think he had some ammunition, too. I tried to persuade him to get rid of it, but he never would."

"I see." MacGregor leaned back. "Well, I think that will do for the moment, madam, unless you have anything else you want to tell us." MacGregor remembered his manners just in time and turned to Dover. "Have you any further questions, sir?"

Dover pointedly ignored his sergeant and addressed himself to

Mrs. Lucian. "What's your first name?"

"Thelma."

Dover inserted a podgy and none-too-clean finger into his mouth and dislodged a currant which had got stuck behind his upper denture. "And your maiden name?"

"Hamilton."

Dover examined the excavated currant dubiously before shoving it back in his mouth and consuming it. He searched round in his pockets, apparently without success. "Where's that damn handkerchief?"

"Here you are, sir."

Dover snatched the envelope from MacGregor's hands and tossed it across to Mrs. Lucian. "That yours?"

Mrs. Lucian examined the handkerchief unhappily. "I'm not sure. I don't think—"

"Got your initials on it!" barked Dover, signaling to MacGregor that he was ready for another cup of coffee.

"Well, yes—my initials before I was married," admitted Mrs. Lucian, "but I haven't used my maiden name for over ten years. I may have had some embroidered like this but it's all so long ago—"

"How do you explain your handkerchief being found under your husband's corpse?" demanded Dover.

Mrs. Lucian began to get flustered. "Well, I can't. I certainly didn't put it there. Maybe Will still had it."

"Kept it as a memento of you?" sneered Dover, who enjoyed bullying defenseless women. "Very romantic! What happened? You leave him for somebody with a bit more money?"

"No, I didn't," retorted Mrs. Lucian angrily. "Not that it's any business of yours, but my present husband happens to earn a good bit less than Will does—did. And I didn't meet him until several months after my first marriage was as dead as a dodo."

Luckily Dover didn't feel quite ready for a full-scale confrontation so early in the morning, so he sank back sulkily while MacGregor took over and calmed things down.

"Just a couple more questions, if you don't mind, Mrs. Lucian," he said, smiling fetchingly so that she'd realize that not all members of the Metropolitan Police were that disagreeable. "What did Mr. Willoughby do for a living?"

"He was an income-tax consultant," said Mrs. Lucian, flashing a glance of pure hatred at Dover, "and a very successful one."

"Do you know if he had any business worries?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I told you, I haven't seen him for ages and I know practically nothing about his affairs. Judging by the way his flat was furnished, though, I wouldn't have thought he was short of money. In any case, Will just wasn't the type to get himself into financial difficulties."

MacGregor frowned. "He never married again?"

"No."

"Do you know if he had a girl friend?"

"I should imagine he's had several over the years," said Mrs. Lucian indifferently.

When MacGregor came back after having escorted Mrs. Lucian out, he found Dover staring moodily at the trayful of empty crockery which lay on the table.

"I've told Mrs. Lucian we'll send somebody round later to take a formal statement, sir."

If MacGregor had hoped to impress the Chief Inspector with his efficiency he was destined to be disappointed. Dover had weightier problems on his mind. "Got a cigarette, laddie?" he asked.

MacGregor was strongly tempted to say no, but he lost his nerve at the last moment. Resentfully he got his cigarette case out and passed it over.

"I reckon she did it," said Dover, who was a great believer in hedging his bets. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's the wife. Or the ex-wife," he added as he saw MacGregor's mouth open. "You mark my words, she came round here last night and croaked him. Then she turned up this morning, all innocent-like, to discover the body and clean up any clues she may have left."

MacGregor had learned long ago not to be surprised at anything Dover did; but he found this about face too mercurial to let pass. "I thought you were inclined to the suicide theory, sir."

Dover ignored that. "You'd better clear off and interview a few of the neighbors, hadn't you? Ask 'em if they spotted Mrs. What's-her-name sneaking up here last night."

"Well, as a matter of fact, sir, I've just been having a word with the old couple who live here. They're a pretty nosey pair and they seem to have kept their eyes open where Willoughby is concerned. I think they may know something about his lady friend."

"Wheel 'em in," said Dover. "And then you shove off."

MacGregor's face fell. "Don't you think it would be better, sir, if I stayed and took—?"

"No," said Dover nastily, "I don't."

Mr. and Mrs. Grey were a retired couple who were extremely anxious that Dover shouldn't think they spent their entire time spying on their next-door neighbor.

"It's just," explained Mrs. Grey with a complacent smile, "that occasionally one can't help noticing things."

"Noticing things," echoed Mr. Grey with an approving nod.

Dover recognized the signs and bestirred himself to get a question in before he was overwhelmed by a flood. "Did you hear a shot last night?"

For some reason, known only to the Greys, this was classified as man's talk and Mr. Grey spoke up boldly. "Not with these walls," he said, proudly slapping the nearest one. "None of your prefabricated jerry-building here! This is solid, good old-fashioned workmanship, this is. You'd not hear a bomb going off in the next room, never mind a pistol."

"Besides," put in Mrs. Grey, "we had the television on."

Dover slumped back in his chair and rested his head wearily on one hand. "All right," he rumbled, "what do you know?"

"That woman was there last night," said Mrs. Grey, her mouth settling into a disapproving line. "'The dark lady,' my hubbie calls her, though in my opinion she's far from being what I call a lady and she changes the color of her hair more often than he changes his socks. Blonde one day, brown the next, and a redhead the week after. All wigs, of course. You can always tell."

"I thought it was different women at first," chuckled Mr. Grey.

His wife jerked her head emphatically. "I didn't! It takes more than a change of hair to fool me. I should have liked to have told Mr. Willoughby that, just to let him know, but of course I didn't. Well, it was none of our business, really, was it? Actually, she was quite unmistakable once you got used to her. Tall and a bit on the broad-shouldered side. Like Joan Crawford. Big feet, too. Like Greta Garbo. Of course, what her face was like, that I can't tell you because she always took very good care never to let me get a proper look at her. Very furtive, she was."

"Very furtive," agreed Mr. Grey.

"You never," Mrs. Grey continued with hardly a pause for breath, "so much as laid eyes on her until it had gone dark. Never. She used to come creeping in and out like a thief in the night, turning her head away as soon as she saw you and only nodding when you said good evening. And those stairs outside are

terribly badly lit, you know. My husband has written several times to the landlord about them."

"Several times," confirmed Mr. Grey.

Dover was getting impatient. "What about last night?"

"I was just coming to that," said Mrs. Grey. "It was when I was putting the milk bottles out. That'd be about ten o'clock, wouldn't it, dear?"

"About ten o'clock," said Mr. Grey.

"She used to come and go at all sorts of different times," Mrs. Grey went on, "but her little subterfuges didn't deceive us. Oh, dear me, no! We were just a bit too clever for her, weren't we, my love?" Mrs. Grey received her husband's affirmative nod and turned back to Dover. "We could hear her coming along the pavement past our window, you see. She didn't know that. Her step"—Mrs. Grey smiled smugly to herself—"was quite unmistakable."

"Quite unmistakable."

Reluctantly Dover made an effort to get the facts clear. "So last night you saw this woman going into Mr. What's-his-name's flat at ten o'clock?"

"That's right," agreed Mrs. Grey.

"Right," said her husband.

"See her leaving?"

Mrs. Grey was sorry but, no, she hadn't.

Mr. Grey was sorry, too.

"Any idea who she is? Her name? Where she comes from?"

Alas, the woman's identity remained a complete mystery—though not, Mrs. Grey managed to imply, through any want of their trying. "Her clothes were very good," she added, anxious to be helpful. "She was always dressed in the height of fashion. I dread to think how much she spent on them. She was wearing a lovely black and white check coat last night and a red silk head scarf."

"Is that so?" said Dover. "Well, you can give my sergeant a full description." He postponed getting to his feet a bit longer though, God knows, he'd had more than enough of Mrs. Grey. "This ex-wife woman you had in here?"

"Mrs. Lucian?"

"Could she be What's-his-name's nocturnal visitor?"

And it was with Mrs. Grey's tinkling laugh at the sheer absurdity of such an idea jarring in his ears that Dover finally re-

treated in search of a bit of peace and quiet. He loathed these first few hours of a criminal investigation with everybody rushing around like scalded cats and no place a chap could sit and think and call his soul his own. However, from long experience Dover knew that, once the initial hullabaloo was over, the quietest place was frequently in the eye of the storm.

He lumbered up to the young constable still on guard outside Mr. Willoughby's flat. "Anybody still in there?"

"I'm afraid they've all gone, sir."

"Good," said Dover. "Well, I'll be able to pursue my own investigations now." He fixed the constable with an eagle eye. "And I don't want to be disturbed by anybody at all for the next hour. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'd better. Oh, and I shall want some lunch laid on, so start organizing it. A couple of bottles of beer, a pie or two, some sandwiches, and a few cakes. Nothing elaborate."

The young policeman nodded, saucer-eyed.

Once inside the flat Dover proceeded to subject each and every room to the most meticulous search. Sergeant MacGregor would have been dumfounded if he had witnessed such thoroughness and such reckless expenditure of energy. It was, however, all to no avail. Dover couldn't find a single cigarette in the place.

He was not in the sunniest of moods when he flung the front door open again.

The young policeman jumped halfway out of his skin.

"Got any cigarettes on you, laddie?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't smoke."

"That's no bloody excuse!" snarled Dover. "You could carry some for other people, couldn't you?" He underlined his extreme displeasure by slamming the door as hard as he could.

That left only food. Dover waddled back to the kitchen and glumly surveyed the shelves. Corn flakes. Tins of sardines. Baked beans. Eggs. A couple of lamb chops on a plate in the fridge. 'Strewth, was the fellow on a blooming diet or something? In the end Dover grabbed a bottle of pickled onions and took it back with him to the sitting room where he collapsed onto the settee and thankfully put his feet up.

The dead body had already been removed to the mortuary but Dover wouldn't have minded if it had still been lying there on the floor beside him. He helped himself to a pickled onion and gazed

idly round the room. Blimey, What's-his-name did himself jolly well! Leather armchairs, sporting prints and antique dueling pistols plastered all over the walls, color television . . .

Sergeant MacGregor, being only human, wasn't in any hurry to get back and report his progress. Grateful to be let off the leash even for a short while, he concentrated on doing an unspectacular but conscientious job. He interviewed all the other occupants of the block of flats and refused to become disheartened when his efforts went unrewarded. One could hardly expect everybody to be as genteelly inquisitive as the Greys.

Indeed, Mrs. Grey was lurking discreetly on the landing when MacGregor came down the stairs and he was obliged to go back into her flat and take her statement. Then, armed with a detailed description of the unknown woman, he commandeered the Greys' phone and began to organize his reinforcements.

Whether the late Mr. Willoughby's girl friend lived within walking distance of his flat or farther afield, inquiries could be made. From local residents and from taxi drivers. Although there was an underground station nearby and a bus route only three minutes' walk away, MacGregor thought that the taxi drivers would be the best bet to start with. According to Mrs. Grey's evidence, the woman sometimes visited Willoughby long after the buses and tubes had stopped.

In fact, MacGregor was rather intrigued by the hours the woman kept and he wondered if she was unmarried. Married women usually confine their extramarital activities to the hours when their husbands are safely away at work. Was this woman married to a man on the night shift or had she, perhaps, a job of her own? Willoughby himself, of course, wouldn't be free until the evenings but his girl friend did seem to keep some very late hours, though Mrs. Grey claimed to have seen her leaving the flat as early as eight o'clock on a couple of occasions.

Still, the extensive inquiries necessary to track the woman down were best left to the local police division. So, after he had set them in motion, MacGregor went off to find Dover.

MacGregor and lunch arrived on the scene of the crime at exactly the same moment. Dover opened one disconsolate eye and belched as MacGregor set the tray down. It is no part of a Detective Sergeant's duties to play nursemaid to his superior officer but MacGregor was a kindly man and didn't think it fair to expose the young policeman to the trauma of seeing Dover feeding.

Dover dragged himself into a sitting position and belched again. "Damn pickled onions!" he grumbled, gesturing with a flabby hand at the bottle which was now three-quarters empty. "They play hell with your guts."

MacGregor immediately became busy opening Dover's beer and placing the pile of sandwiches near to hand. Diversionary tactics were essential because, if Dover got started on the vagaries of his stomach, there was little hope of ever stopping him.

"Find out anything?" demanded Dover suspiciously as he came up for air with a foam mustache superimposed on his own.

"Not really, sir." Out of habit MacGregor pulled out his notebook and began turning over the pages. "One or two of the other residents have seen Mrs. Grey's 'dark lady' but they don't know anything more about her. The descriptions are, as usual, inconclusive." He read from his notebook, "'Above average height and well built.' I'm having the usual house-to-house inquiries made in the neighborhood, sir, and we're questioning taxi drivers. Of course"—he removed Dover's dirty plate and substituted another on which squatted a greasy-looking pork pie—"she may turn up of her own accord when she finds out what's happened."

"And pigs might fly!" scoffed Dover, catching a dribble of jelly before it dropped off his chin onto his overcoat. "She's the one we're after, you know."

MacGregor noted with resignation that yet another unhatched chick was being counted. "Yes, sir."

"Stands out a mile," insisted Dover as he sensed that his previous statement hadn't exactly bowled MacGregor over. "Lovers' tiff. What's-his-name gets fed up and gives her her marching orders. She cuts up rough—you know what women are like—accuses him of tossing her aside like an old glove and shoots him. Bang!"

MacGregor chewed his bottom lip. "With his gun, sir?"

"Why not? She's been shacking up with him for years, hasn't she? She'd know about the gun and where he kept it. Then all she has to do is wipe the fingerprints off, let herself out quietly, and disappear into the night. Nobody knows who she is or where she lives or anything."

"Oh, steady on, sir!" MacGregor tried to soften the implied criticism of Dover's methods by offering the plate of cakes. "We've hardly started our investigations yet. There may be dozens of people who know all about her and her association with Wiloughby."

"Such as?"

"Well, his friends and business colleagues, for example. Or relatives. Just because a total stranger like Mrs. Grey doesn't know everything, it doesn't mean—"

"Bet you!" said Dover sulkily. His temper was not being improved by the piece of seed cake he had just gobbled down. He seemed to have been digging those blasted bits out of his dentures for days!

"In any case, sir," MacGregor continued, "if she'd really intended to make a run for it, she'd hardly have left a roomful of clues behind her, would she? If we get no joy anywhere else, we'll probably be able to trace her through all those clothes and things."

Dover scowled and brushed ineffectively at the crumbs and beer he had spilt down his lapels. "She could hardly take 'em with her, could she?" he objected. "'Strewth, she'd need a bloomin' truck to move that lot! Besides, I don't reckon there was anything premeditated about this crime. She just saw red and let him have it. No time for elaborate plans." He gazed sullenly at the beer MacGregor was pouring out for him. "Is that the last of it?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," MacGregor, ever hopeful, pushed the bill for one pound and sixpence into what he trusted was Dover's line of vision. Dover looked clean through it. MacGregor sighed. "Would you like a cigarette, sir?"

Dover's mean little eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I just thought that while you were letting your lunch settle, I might go and have another look round that spare bedroom."

Dover was too old a hand to be caught like that. Give this young pup an inch and he'd be clapping the handcuffs on the murderer before you had time to catch your breath! With a nimbleness that only pure bloody-mindedness could inspire, the Chief Inspector jumped up off his settee. "I'll come with you," he announced and had the exquisite satisfaction of seeing an expression of acute chagrin pass over MacGregor's face. He didn't hesitate to rub the salt in. "Just in case you miss something, laddie."

In the spare bedroom Dover, with his cigarette, established his command post on the bed and directed operations from there. MacGregor started with the wardrobe and began carefully and methodically to remove all the dresses and coats from their hangers. The frocks were pretty and very feminine but not one of them contained a maker's label. There were three coats, one of

fur. MacGregor went through the pockets before returning them to the hangers. He turned to Dover and shook his head.

"No labels anywhere, sir. They've all been removed."

Dover was not disheartened. "Try the shoes."

But the shoes, apart from the fact that they confirmed the rather large size of their owner's feet, gave no indication of their provenance, either.

"I suppose," said MacGregor doubtfully, "that we could get some experts in. They might be able to identify the manufacturers. Of course, if she just bought them over the counter in a chain store somewhere and paid cash—" He sighed and turned his attentions to the dressing table and the highboy. Handbags—all empty. Stockings, frilly nylon underwear, gloves, handkerchiefs, negligees.

"No laundry marks?" asked Dover, reclining like a sated pasha on his divan.

MacGregor dropped a pair of shocking-pink panties back in the drawer. "These are the sort of things a woman would wash by hand, sir."

"Well," said Dover, "faint heart never won fair lady. Get cracking!"

MacGregor slowly completed his search of the room, looking under the furniture and behind the pictures. He even got a bit of his own back when he obliged Dover to transfer to a chair while he stripped the bed.

"Oh, dear," said MacGregor as he pulled the pink satin bed-cover back into place. "You'd think there'd be something that'd give us a lead, wouldn't you, sir? Even those wigs are ready-made ones, bought off the peg."

Dover grunted, most of his attention being engaged in climbing back onto the bed. "That gabbling old cow in the other flat—didn't she mention what the woman was wearing last night?"

Nothing was guaranteed to spur MacGregor on to greater efforts than the lively fear that; by some miracle, Dover had spotted something he'd missed. "I believe she did, sir," he agreed, searching his excellent memory at top speed. He had Mrs. Grey's statement in his notebook but he didn't want to admit even a partial defeat by referring to it. "Yes, she said that the woman was wearing a black and white check coat and a red silk head scarf." MacGregor hesitated and then leaped for the wardrobe. "Oh, of course, sir. You think this coat—" He pulled the black and white coat off

its hanger. "And,"—he rushed over to the highboy—"this head scarf—?"

"It's a possibility."

MacGregor creased his forehead into a worried frown. "She changed her clothes before she left?"

"Must have. She'd have never left without a coat at this time of year."

"But—why?"

"Search me." Dover was making it plain that he had no intention of doing all the work but he did proffer one suggestion. "Maybe it started raining and she put a mac on."

MacGregor shook his head. "No, it didn't rain last night, sir." He examined the coat again. "Perhaps she got blood on it . . . No—no blood."

"She wouldn't have left bloodstained clothing behind, you nitwit!" snapped Dover. "She was trying to make it look like suicide, wasn't she? A bloodstained coat left behind would soon have knocked that idea on the head."

MacGregor who, even after years of working with Dover, still had his pride, objected to being called a nitwit. "If she really was trying to make it look like suicide, she didn't do a very good job of it, did she? She shot him on the wrong side of the head and she wiped the fingerprints off the gun. And then what about that handkerchief she left under the body? That was obviously meant to direct our suspicions towards Mrs. Lucian. Well, you don't try to incriminate somebody else for murder if you're trying to fool the police into thinking it's suicide."

"Maybe she's a nut," said Dover drearily. His stomach was beginning to rumble in a most peculiar way. Could that pie have been spoiled?

"The handkerchief!" MacGregor slapped himself on the side of the head. "Just a minute, sir." He crossed over to the dressing table and pulled out the top drawer. There were a dozen handkerchiefs but he unfolded them all before turning to Dover with a grin of triumph. "Look at that, sir!"

Dover directed a jaundiced eye at the handkerchief being held out to him. It was similar to the one found under Willoughby's body and had the same two initials embroidered on it.

MacGregor was like a dog with two tails. "These initials belong to the unknown woman, sir. It's just a coincidence that they happen to fit Mrs. Lucian's maiden name as well."

As soon as Dover perceived that his sergeant was coming round, more or less, to his point of view, he changed it. "I still haven't crossed that ex-wife off my list," he said stubbornly and relished MacGregor's wince. "Her story's got more holes in it than a pauper's winding sheet."

MacGregor turned away and began to fold up the handkerchiefs. It gave him something to do with his hands and probably saved Dover from getting the punch in the nose he so richly deserved. He didn't resume the discussion until he was sure he'd got his voice under control. "Really, sir?"

"Yes, really, sir!" Dover as usual made a hash of mimicking his sergeant's accent. "What about that cock-and-bull story she spun us about a mysterious telephone call and him begging her to come round and hold his hand after ten years?"

"I don't think that is incompatible with a tentative suspicion of the missing girl friend, sir," objected MacGregor. "Perhaps Willoughby had been having trouble with the girl friend earlier and she threatened him. Willoughby got frightened and felt that he had to turn to somebody for help."

"And he turned to his ex-wife?" yelled Dover. "You're wasting your time in the police, laddie. You ought to be writing blooming fairy tales."

MacGregor was spared more samples of Dover's heavy-handed wit by the noise of scuffling and the sound of raised voices coming from the sitting room outside. He went across and opened the door to find the young policeman, helmet askew, grappling with a plump middle-aged man. "What," he demanded in a voice of thunder that might have come from Dover himself, "the hell is going on here?"

The combatants disentangled themselves and stood looking sheepishly at each other.

The young policeman adjusted his helmet. "This chap was trying to run away, Sergeant," he said breathlessly. "He came up the stairs and then, as soon as he caught sight of me, he turned on his heel and—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the plump man indignantly. "I just changed my mind, that's all." He pulled his coat straight. "And I wish to register my objection to the brutal and entirely unwarranted manhandling I have just received."

Dover appeared in the doorway and the plump man forgot his complaints and goggled. MacGregor quickly took advantage of

this hiatus to dismiss the young policeman and get everybody else sitting down calmly.

"Now, sir," he began sternly, "may I ask what you are doing here?"

The plump man was staring at the rough chalk outline in the middle of the carpet. He looked up. "I came to see Mr. Willoughby. Look, what's been happening here?"

MacGregor had the typical detective's habit of never answering questions. "Are you a friend of Mr. Willoughby's, sir?"

The plump man nodded. He was looking at the chalk outline again. "Is he dead?"

"Why should you think that, sir?"

The plump man gazed round helplessly. "Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? The constable on the door—and I suppose you are a policeman, too?"

"I am Sergeant MacGregor, sir, and this is Chief Inspector Dover."

"Oh," said the plump man, rather inadequately. "Er—how do you do?"

Dover had been showing signs of restlessness for some time and now he exploded. "'Strewth!" he spat—at MacGregor, of course. "Can you get a move on? We're supposed to be investigating a murder case, not holding a ruddy tea party!"

"Murder?" The plump man's mouth dropped open. "You don't mean Will's been *murdered*?"

Now that Dover had let, if not the cat, at least a fair-sized kitten out of the bag, MacGregor tried to remedy the situation. He got his notebook out and assumed his most official air. "Your name, sir?"

"Crump. Charles Anthony Crump."

"And what are you doing here, sir?"

"I told you," said Mr. Crump, still staring in awed fascination at Dover. "I came round to see Will."

On the settee Dover roused himself again. "At this time of day?" he demanded incredulously. "What made you think he'd be here?"

Mr. Crump cringed visibly and ran a pink tongue over his lips. "I rang his office and they said he hadn't come in this morning. I thought he might be unwell or something."

Dover had many shortcomings but his ability to spot a victim was unerring. He squinted at Mr. Crump like a somewhat over-

weight stoat sizing up a juicy rabbit. "Very considerate," he sneered.

Mr. Crump tried to fight back. "It's just that Will has been extremely upset and worried recently and I was afraid—well, I was afraid he might do something silly."

"You mean, commit suicide?" asked MacGregor, who always found Dover's antics acutely embarrassing.

Mr. Crump nodded. "I must admit the possibility crossed my mind. He had a gun, you know."

"Do you know what he was worried about, sir?"

"Oh"—Mr. Crump squirmed uneasily in his chair—"things, you know. Middle age. Life turning a shade sour in general."

"Women?" That was Dover sticking his oar in once more.

"Women?" Mr. Crump started nervously and again flushed to the tips of his ears. "Well, I—I don't know."

"You knew about his popsie though, didn't you?"

"His popsie?"

Mr. Crump's obvious distress was meat and drink to Dover and he gave the screw another twist by appealing mockingly to MacGregor. "Just like a little parrot, ain't he?"

"Now, look here"—Mr. Crump apparently thought he still had a few human rights left—"I must protest against being spoken to like that! I am perfectly willing to help in any way I can but I will not"—he made the mistake of catching Dover's eye—"be browbeaten," he concluded feebly.

"Then stop messing about and answer a simple question when you're asked," roared Dover. "What about What's-his-name's bit of fluff?"

"I know nothing about her," wailed Mr. Crump.

"How long have you known What's-his-name?"

Mr. Crump bit his lip to stop it trembling. "Eight or nine years, I suppose."

"Been to this flat before?"

"Of course I have."

"And you didn't know anything about that love nest in there?"

"No!" screamed Mr. Crump.

"Liar!" bellowed Dover.

"Oh, God!" Mr. Crump's voice broke into a sob and he buried his head in his hands.

Dover's pasty face split into a grin of pure delight. Exerting himself above and beyond the call of duty he got up off the settee

and bore down on the unfortunate Mr. Crump, seizing him by two greedy handfuls of coat and yanking him to his feet. "You're hiding something, you miserable little runt," he howled, shaking Mr. Crump to and fro like a ragdoll. "Well, I'm going to find out what it is if I have to break every bone in your body!"

Still rattling Mr. Crump backward and forward, Dover turned to MacGregor. "This is the joker we've been looking for, laddie! We've got our murderer!"

MacGregor knew that he ought to say something, if only goodbye. It was not as if the sight of Dover beating a confession out of a perfectly innocent member of the public was any great novelty. MacGregor had witnessed it several times before and knew there was little he could do to induce Dover to substitute brains for brawn. Still, the effort had to be made, if only because one day the worm might turn and MacGregor would find himself involved in the ensuing scandal.

"Er—easy on, sir."

For a man who had just found his fourth solution to a crime in less than three hours, Dover proved remarkably amenable to the warning. Or, maybe, it was just that his arms were getting tired. In any case he slung an exhausted and terrified Mr. Crump back into his chair. Mr. Crump's ordeal, however, was by no means over.

Very deliberately Dover rested his hands on the arms of Mr. Crump's chair and advanced his face until he and his prey were virtually nose to nose. "Where," he asked, breathing heavily and menacingly, "were you last night?"

The wretched Mr. Crump raised a trembling hand and eased his collar. "I had nothing to do with Will's death," he protested hoarsely. "I swear I didn't."

Dover raised a meaty fist. "Where were you?"

"I stayed on at the party. I stayed on for hours after Will had left, honestly I did. I can prove it, too. Anybody there will vouch for me. I didn't leave until one o'clock this morning."

Dover straightened. "What party?" he demanded. If there was one thing Dover disliked almost as much as work it was a surprise.

"Just a party," hedged Mr. Crump, looking shifty.

Dover refrained from battering out further details. He had other fish to fry. "And What's-his-name was at it?"

Mr. Crump nodded his aching head.

"Last night?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Dover, thoroughly disgusted with this unwelcome complication, retired to his settee and let MacGregor sort things out.

MacGregor moved in with a will and under his shrewd questioning it emerged that the dead man had, indeed, spent his last evening in this vale of tears at a party. There had been some sort of row or quarrel—Mr. Crump was not forthcoming about it and for the time MacGregor didn't press him—and Willoughby, considerably wrought up, had left at about half-past nine.

"How long would it take him to get back here?"

Mr. Crump shrugged helplessly. "Half an hour at that time of night, I should think."

MacGregor glanced at Dover to see if the significance of this had sunk in. It hadn't. Somewhat puzzled, MacGregor went over and whispered in Dover's ear. "Willoughby must have got back here last night, sir, at almost the same time as Miss X."

"So what?"

"Well, nothing, really, sir, except that it just struck me as a bit odd. I mean, if he was expecting her to call, you wouldn't think he'd have gone out for the evening, would you?"

"God knows," said Dover irritably.

Since this appeared to be the only contribution the Chief Inspector was going to make to the discussion, MacGregor returned to Mr. Crump and tried a new line of questioning. "Do you know Mr. Willoughby's ex-wife, sir? Mrs. Lucian?"

"No." Mr. Crump looked fractionally happier with the change of topic. "They were already divorced when I met him."

"What was the relationship between them?"

"I don't know how she felt about Will but he was very bitter about her. Especially when he'd had a few drinks. He used to claim she'd let him down and he blamed her and the breakup of his marriage for all his troubles."

"He had a grudge against her?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. He could get to be quite a bore about it at times, threatening to get even with her one day and make her sorry for all she'd done to him." Mr. Crump looked anxiously at MacGregor. "It was all talk, you know."

"You can say that again," came from the settee. "Look, Sergeant, just get the names and addresses of the people who

were at this party and then we can start busting this creep's phony alibi."

With MacGregor's attention momentarily distracted by the dulcet tones of his master's voice, Mr. Crump misguidedly decided to make a run for it.

He didn't get very far.

MacGregor brought him down with a flying tackle before Crump even reached the door, and Dover, staggering up when all the excitement was over, joyfully extinguished the dying sparks of resistance with his boot.

It was a sadder and sorer Mr. Crump who eventually recovered sufficiently to resume his place on the hot seat. "I simply can't give you the names and addresses," he moaned, with the tears trickling down his cheeks. "I simply can't!"

"Want a bet?" chuckled Dover, bunching his fist and flourishing it under Mr. Crump's nose.

"But they'll just deny they were there!" sobbed Mr. Crump. "I know they will."

Dover scowled. "What sort of a party was this, for God's sake?"

In the end, when Mr. Crump had been forcefully persuaded that further silence would certainly result in his nose being bloodied, his eyes blacked, and his teeth smashed down his throat, he resolved to reveal all. "It was a dressing-up party," he whispered in a barely audible voice. "Just a bit of harmless fun, you know."

He got his handkerchief out and blew his nose with considerable pathos. "Crossdressing, we call it. Men dressed up as"—he choked on the word—"women."

Dover gasped.

MacGregor was more sophisticated. "You mean it was a transvestite party?"

"Yes," murmured Mr. Crump. "We meet about once a fortnight. Or"—he added miserably—"we did. I suppose this'll be the end of it now!"

MacGregor was beginning to see the light. "Willoughby was a transvestite?"

"One of the best. He used to brag that he could pass for a woman anywhere."

"I see! So all those women's clothes in the spare bedroom are his?"

"He spent a fortune on them," sighed Mr. Crump enviously.

"And last night he changed into drag here in the flat and

traveled to and from your party in women's clothes?"

Mr. Crump brightened at the memory. "He looked quite, quite beautiful."

"Well, there we are, sir," said MacGregor, tossing a triumphant smile at Dover. "We needn't waste any more time searching for the elusive Miss X. 'She' was Willoughby himself."

"He called himself Rosina when he was dressed," explained Mr. Crump helpfully. "I'm Betsy—though, of course, I'm not in Will's class by any means. I wouldn't dream of taking the risks he did."

"When we want any more of your reminiscences," snapped Dover, "we'll ask for 'em!" Having cowed Mr. Crump into silence Dover gave MacGregor a piece of his mind. "All you've established so far, clever devil, is that What's-his-name was as kinky as a dog's hind leg. You still haven't proved how he came to be dead."

MacGregor nobly forebore to point out that this was supposed to be Dover's job. "Oh, I think we've got the general picture now, sir," he said smugly. "I imagine Willoughby found that this transvestite business was beginning to be dangerous. After all, it's a pretty risky pastime, isn't it? He must have been scared stiff the whole thing would come out."

"Oh, it's a terrible strain," agreed Mr. Crump feelingly. "Will had wanted to stop for ages, but he just couldn't. He was terribly ashamed of himself, really. Then one of the other 'girls' said something bitchy to him last night and it all came pouring out. How he hated them and their silly primping and preening and how he hated himself for being like them. I thought he'd really come to the end of his tether this time but he stormed out before anybody could stop him."

"And came back here," said MacGregor, "changed into his pajamas and shot himself."

Dover was looking far from pleased. "In the wrong side of the head?" he objected. "Without leaving fingerprints on the gun? And in the dark?"

"Oh, I think that was all a rather silly attempt to throw the suspicion of murder on Mrs. Lucian, sir. That's why he phoned her and used her handkerchief to wrap around the gun. Mr. Crump says he blamed her for all his troubles. If she had turned up last night as Willoughby planned she should, we would certainly have had plenty of questions to ask her."

Dover was never one to face facts gracefully. "Nobody ever told

me that he was wearing pajamas," he grouched.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir," apologized MacGregor, tongue in cheek. "I thought you'd looked at the body."

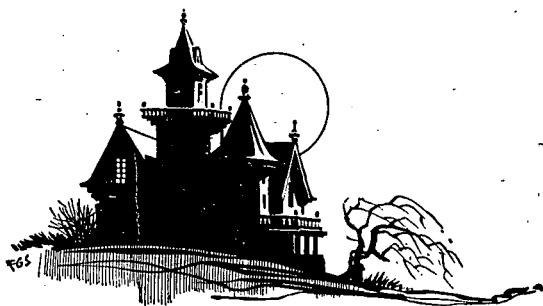
Dover sniffed angrily. Much more of young MacGregor's lip and he'd— "Where did that handkerchief come from, then?"

"Left behind by Mrs. Lucian when she and Willoughby split up, don't you think, sir? A couple of handkerchiefs are easily overlooked."

"Hm." Dover sighed deeply. "I said it was suicide right from the first," he pointed out pugnaciously.

"Indeed you did, sir." MacGregor looked at his watch. "Well, I think I'd better call off the search for Miss X and then I'll start getting the formal statements and begin on the report, shall I, sir? Unless"—he bethought himself rather naughtily—"you'd prefer to do it yourself, sir?"

Dover stored that up for later retaliation. "I've got plenty to keep me busy here," he said, as much for Mr. Crump's benefit as for MacGregor's. "And on your way out tell that young copper I'm ready for my tea!"



Henry T. Parry

Homage to John Keats

"You thought of everything, Howard, everything but one small detail . . ." No, there was something else that Howard had not thought of, something no one in his right mind would even dream of foreseeing . . .

When Howard P. Ransom reached 55, he retired from his job, sold his house, murdered his wife, and settled down in Rome, thereby fulfilling four long-cherished ambitions. He loathed his house, detested his job, hated his wife and loved the prospect of taking up life, late but renewed, in a foreign capital of endless attraction.

His job, he felt, was far beneath one of his talent but it paid so well that his love of money outweighed his distaste. His house was a constant burden, insatiable in its demands for repairs, rapacious in its tax requirements, an unstaunchable bleeding of the money and time that he would rather have spent on his boat. But it was his wife Hannah whom he regarded as the major obstacle to freedom and a new life.

As the years of their marriage passed, whatever of love and understanding there may have been had vanished, with Hannah exhibiting a half-hidden sufferance bordering on contempt, and he an impotent chafing and smoldering resentment. He found that the cute pussycat face of 22 became the snarling mask of a stalking tiger at 50.

Hannah had adamantly refused to agree to a divorce, primarily because Howard wanted it. For Howard to have simply walked out was repellent to his nature, which required order and planning and abhorred loose ends and unfinished business. This plus the fatal flaw in the mind of every killer—the conviction that his action was justified—led him to the murder of his wife.

The act itself was simple, well planned, and swift. One of the few remaining things they did together was to take an occasional weekend cruise in the boat. Returning home just after dark one

Sunday, they rounded the breakwater at the end of the Delaware-Chesapeake Canal and turned north against the ebbing tide where the river and bay met. Two miles upstream Howard put the engine on idle and came astern to where Hannah sat.

"I want you to put on this life jacket. The tide is ebbing quite strongly and there's all this debris floating about. If I have to make a quick turn and if you should be standing, you might go over the side."

"Oh, Howard, is that necessary? Such unusual precautions here on the river."

"This is practically the top end of Delaware Bay. And there's this heavy tanker traffic—"

"Oh, all right, all right. A lesson in geography. Always a lesson in something."

"Just this one last lesson then."

She stood and he helped her into the life jacket, steadying her as she staggered slightly, and swiftly tied the ribbons. He could smell the perfume she used, a smell that he had come to loathe as much as once it had attracted him.

"Howard," her voice rose in bewilderment, "What have you done to this jacket? It weighs a ton."

"Yes," he agreed, "it's packed with lead"—and he pushed her over the stern.

The greasy water was barely disturbed as she went under. He switched on the spotlight and played it back and forth over the water. Crates, fruit baskets, odd pieces of lumber, all swam placidly by on the outward tide, but the surface betrayed no sign of what had happened.

For two hours he waited, to be sure that his plan had worked, and then headed for the nearest marina and a telephone to report his well-rehearsed story to the Coast Guard, with special care in placing the scene of the incident farther up the river than it had actually occurred.

It took Howard three months to make what he thought of as his getaway. Calls placed at lengthening intervals to the Coast Guard brought no news and elicited finally the opinion that there was no likelihood of the body being recovered.

The house was sold, removing forever the burden of wet basements, rising taxes, and ever more plentiful crops of crabgrass. Kindly neighbors offered sympathy and expressed understanding of his wish for a complete change of scene, expressions which

Howard gravely accepted, inwardly relishing the contrast between his decently submissive outward manner and his inner satisfaction with the fruition of his plans.

Thoughtfully he arranged for a tombstone to be erected—a fact that was noted in the local paper—and had it incised with Hannah's name and the years of her birth and death, and, as indicative of his intentions, he had his own name added, followed by the year of his birth and a small uncarved rectangle in which at the proper time another year would be cut. With a touch of grim wholly uncharacteristic humor he thought that a suitable epitaph for Hannah might be "Lost at sea," but sensibly he restrained himself.

Late in the fall, after a dutiful and symbolic visit to the cemetery, Howard arrived in Rome. Through the columns of a newspaper aimed at the American tourist he rented a small furnished apartment in a converted palazzo on a street near the top of the Spanish Steps, a house reputed to have been owned by a cadet branch of the Medici.

After the spare trimness and openness of his suburban house he was struck by the stony, secretive exteriors of the Roman houses and the contrast with their ornate, pretentious interiors. His living room was furnished with heavy oaken furniture, elaborately carved; one chair with a faded damask cover on its tall back was supposed to have once been the property of the infamous Principe di Canisio who, it was said, had died in it, a messy affair of a jealous husband and a silken cord.

Dim acne-ed mirrors on the walls on each side of the door reflected windows with heavy velvet drapes looped back by tassled rope ties. It seemed that the same style of furniture that was suitable for the palazzo of a doge had been used in this small room, giving it a theatrical, shop-worn splendor. But Howard settled contentedly in these falsely elegant surroundings and gave himself over to the delights of leisurely explorations of the ancient city.

It was not until early summer that he saw Hannah. Or thought he saw Hannah.

He was returning from an afternoon of browsing among the many shops near the Piazza di Spagna and had begun to climb the magnificent stairway street of the Spanish Steps, the sweeping thoroughfare that leads majestically up to the Monte di Trinita. In the wall of the building to the right of the first landing

was the shrine of millions of poetry-loving tourists, the window of the room where the poet Keats had died. He paused on the landing, looking up at the open window, and saw a woman looking down at him, a woman who resembled Hannah.

Shaken, he stared up at her, his mind rejecting the atavistic fear of the dead returned to life and telling himself to wait for a movement or gesture to dispel the likeness, for her aspect to shift from identity to mere similarity. The woman gazed down calmly, framed portraitlike in the window, an absent-minded half smile on her lips, and raised her hand; but whether or not the gesture was in greeting he could not determine. Then the woman slowly moved back from the frame of the window and was out of sight.

He stood and stared upward at the window not 30 feet away, his mind searching for the possibility of error in the execution of his plan, but at no point could he find a mistake. He was brought back to reality when he heard a passing American schoolteacher comment to her companion, "Look. Another poetry lover paying homage to John Keats." As they passed him he smelled the faint fragrance of the same perfume Hannah had used and he wondered if he had smelled it unknowingly as he looked at the woman in the window and if it had not added a subliminal reinforcement to a chance likeness.

He concluded that the resemblance was accidental, but from that time forward, before he fell asleep at night, he saw again the face and form of Hannah framed in the window.

A week later he saw her again.

It was during the intermission before the last act of "Aida," which was performed outdoors at the Baths of Caracalla. He strolled among the crowds under the lights along the wide paths that skirted the towering walls with their shadowed arches recessing into darkness. She was standing under an arch, well back from the walk and partially obscured by the shadow of a tree as well as by the shadows of the arch.

He stopped, the crowd moving slowly past him, and stared at the figure that stood dwarfed by the tall arch, hugging itself as if chilled and idly watching the passing crowd. Her eyes swept over him with no sign of recognition and then swung back to look at him uncertainly as if she were not sure she knew him, and then she turned away toward the interior darkness of the arch, on her lips the same half smile that he had seen from the Steps.

He pushed his way through the crowd toward her but the over-

head lights flicked off and on several times to signal the end of the intermission. By the time he made his way through the returning surge of the crowd she had vanished. He made his way to the entrance where the patrons were returning to their seats and although he observed each one until the first aria was well under way he did not see her again.

Similarly after the performance he watched the main exit but saw no one who remotely resembled his dead wife. But he found this occurrence less troubling than the previous one and although he thought about it constantly for days it did not cause the questioning and examination the first encounter had. A resemblance, close enough to be sure, but it was not Hannah. If it had been, he was certain she could not have resisted showing the new power which she would now have over him.

Three days later in the late afternoon he returned to his apartment, slipped his key into the handsome walnut door, swung the door inward, and froze. Delusions of sight and errors in identification were always possible but there is no auto-suggestion in the sense of the smell. The living room smelled faintly of Hannah's perfume.

Terror spurted in him but he forced himself to stride into the room. Hannah sat in the Principe di Canisio's chair, her face as worn as the scarlet damask that covered the tall back of the chair, and in her hand was an ugly and unladylike .45 caliber automatic. She pointed it upward, directly at his face, so that he looked into its cruel, uncompromising muzzle that seemed small for such a deadly object.

For several seconds they stared at each other wordlessly, the woman who should have been dead and the man who should have been free. She waved the gun toward a slender gilt chair beside the door and he sat down facing her, the light from the window behind her chair making him feel, irrationally, that if only he could be in shadow he would be able to explain everything.

"How?" he managed to whisper.

"You thought of everything, Howard, everything but one small detail. I surfaced under an upturned fruit basket and stayed there while you were making certain with the spotlight that you had murdered me. My clothes made me buoyant for a time and the tide was carrying me downstream away from your light. When I was in sufficient darkness I grabbed a floating timber and paddled to shore just below a refinery. Murder and a polluted river,

Howard! Some form of repayment is indicated, don't you agree?

"I floundered through the marshes until I came to a highway and walked along it until I found a filling station. It was closed but it was also a bus stop. After an hour's wait, during which most of the water dripped out of my clothes—but oh, the smell—a bus marked Ocean City came in and I got on. In the two-hour ride down the coast to Ocean City I planned what I would do.

"First of all, I couldn't let you, or anyone else, know I had survived. You would surely try again. I decided that this was no matter for the law and, besides, what could I prove? I had \$48 in my purse. The next day I got a job as a summer waitress at a restaurant and worked there all summer under an assumed name. I even got a new Social Security number. I worked hard and they liked hard-working steady help who showed up seven days a week and didn't irritate the customers. I also subscribed to our hometown paper so that I would have some way of finding out about you. That tombstone now, that was touching.

"After the summer was over they offered me a job in their Florida place and I worked there until two weeks ago when I had enough money saved for this trip. The paper had reported your departure to live in Rome 'for an indefinite period,' it said, and how wrong that is now. My one fear was that my money would run out before I located you. I didn't realize how easy it is to find an American in Rome. Just watch the tourist attractions long enough and you'll find them.

"I saw you first at the Colosseum one day and followed you to this address. I thought at the time what a fitting place the Colosseum would be to do what I had come to do if it weren't so public. Too bad we didn't meet there by moonlight."

"May I get up and stand by the window?" he asked. "I can't breathe."

"Do," she answered, "but don't get too close. It's too late for accidents."

He walked to the window in the wall behind her chair and stood looking down into the street. Shielded from her direct view by the tall back of her chair she was sitting in, he slowly slid one hand under the window drapery and unhooked the ropelike tie that looped the drape back.

"How did you get out of the life jacket?" he asked, not turning toward her chair.

"Oh, it almost worked. But you made one mistake—one small

detail. When you tied the ribbons of the life jacket your reflexes took over. You tied the same knot that you, and nearly everybody else, ties every day of their lives—a simple bow knot. Under water I gave one pull at the ends of the ribbons and the knots came apart and I slipped out of the jacket. It was simple compared to untying and taking off my sneakers under water as we used to do when I was a girl in camp. If you had tied a good hard square knot, Howard, things would have been different for me. And for you.

"If you're wondering about the gun, I borrowed it—stole it really—from the Florida restaurant. They always kept one near the cash register."

He whirled from the window and leaped toward the back of her chair, the drapery tie outstretched between his hands. Her first shot, fired in frightened reflex at his reflection, shattered the mirror on the wall opposite her chair. Hanging over the chair back, he fumbled desperately to twist the rope tie around her neck. She slid from the chair to the floor and fired backward and upward in the blind instinct of self-preservation.

Howard staggered backward from the impact of the shot, one hand jerking upward and holding the moth-eaten drapery tie as though in some baroque scalp dance, the other clutching the window drape which he pulled to the floor with him as he fell, his body becoming partly hidden in its pretentious folds. She pulled herself to her feet and stood over the body, sickened at the reality of what her plans had brought to pass, and dreading the possibility of having to fire again. But the thing that lay there was still and dead, the rope tie grasped in one hand.

She replaced the gun in her bag, inspected the room carefully to be sure she left no trail, and left the apartment without looking back. She made her way through the streets to the top of the Spanish Steps, rejecting the waiting taxis in case the drivers would be questioned later. Going down the long cascade of the Spanish Steps, she stopped at the landing one flight from the street below and looked up at the figures that drifted aimlessly past the open window of the room where Keats had died.

She wondered what historic shrine this house might be but knew that now she would never find out, any more than she would learn whether operas were performed in ruined bathhouses, as advertised. She had already placed a foot on the next descending step when her body contracted with rigid terror. Looking

down at her from the open window of Keats's room was Howard, or a man who at this distance resembled Howard in startling detail.

He stood in full view immediately in front of the window, looking patient and expectant. She stared up at him in a paralysis of fear; he gazed down at her with serene assurance.

Then the figure slowly disappeared backward into the room, smiling as if in anticipation and passing confidently, almost negligently, a faded rope tie through one hand and then the other.



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Barry Perowne

Raffles and the Point of Morality

While Barry Perowne was living in Majorca, he received a cable from a London editor offering him a strange assignment. The editor had conceived the idea of reviving A. J. Raffles, the immortal cricketer-cracksman of Victorian England, in modern form. Immediately Barry Perowne's mind flew back to the many convergences—and wheels within wheels—that linked his life with that dashing gentleman-burglar of old. Arrangements were quickly made with the executors of the E. W. Hornung Estate, and Mr. Perowne began to resurrect Raffles and his worshipful chronicler, Bunny Manders. And as the years went by, Mr. Perowne wrote more than a million words about Raffles and Bunny, and enjoyed every one of them.

Then, out of a blue sky, the auctorial heir of Hornung received a suggestion from your Editor. Why not, we asked, resume the Raffles stories, not in modern dress as Mr. Perowne had been writing them, but as nearly as possible in the true Hornung-Victorian period, with that aura of decadence and fin-de-siècle flavor which still hangs over the original Hornung tales? The reviver of Raffles, despite his now vast intimacy with the character, had misgivings. Could he really do it?—the authentic Raffles, with his flair and flash, with his hedonism and public-school spirit, with his nonchalance and nerve?

Well, here is the first reverent and reverie-like pastiche of the one and only Raffles . . .

Criminal: A. J. RAFFLES

"Q"

The best haircut in London was to be had at the St. James's Street establishment of S. Shilligan, where the names over the pigeonholes which held the clients' personal brushes and combs constituted a virtual *Who's Who* of the sporting and clubland life of the capital.

Among the pigeonholes was one marked *Mr. A. J. Raffles*.

My old school friend and occasional evil genius, Raffles, had used his influence with Shilligan on my behalf, with the result that, when I dropped in one winter morning for a trim, I had at last the pleasure of seeing, painted in discreet gilt lettering over one of the mahogany pigeonholes, my own name, *Mr. B. Manders*.

"Who was it, Bunny," said a familiar voice from behind me, "who remarked that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive?"

I turned from my gratified contemplation of the pigeonhole to meet the amused grey eyes of Raffles himself. Keen of face, his dark hair crisp, his tweeds immaculate, a pearl in his cravat, he was sitting in one of the saddlebag chairs, awaiting his turn.

"That chap said it," I replied, indicating a pigeonhole marked *Mr. R. L. Stevenson*, a client who was away in Samoa at the time. "Poetic license, of course. There's no truth in it."

I dropped into the chair beside Raffles and looked around for the proprietor, as I wished to thank him for the favour of my pigeonhole. Two of the three barber chairs had clients in them, but the chair usually presided over by S. Shilligan in person was unoccupied.

"Where's Mr. Shilligan this morning, Tom?" I asked the assistant busy at the nearest chair.

"He's stepped down the street to the Palace, Mr. Manders," said Tom Bidwell, a pleasant, middle-aged fellow, "to give H.R.H. a trim."

"A Command Performance?" said Raffles. "Won't H.R.H.'s valet feel hurt, Tom?"

"When it comes to a trim, Mr. Raffles," said Tom Bidwell, "H.R.H. swears by Mr. Shilligan."

A boy came in from the street just then, a sturdy lad about twelve years old, with apple cheeks as red as his woollen cap, muffler, and mittens.

"Did you get those razors, Jack?" asked Tom Bidwell.

"Yes, father," the boy replied, "to be ground and set, the gentleman said. And please, father, the Serpentine's frozen and chaps are sliding on it."

"All right, you can go sliding now," said Bidwell, "but watch out for thin ice, hear me?"

As the boy departed with joyous alacrity, the client in Bidwell's chair chuckled. "Likely lad you've got there, Tom. For a minute, seeing him in the mirror as he came in, I thought it was young Vernon Vyse-Halley, son of a man I know. They're much alike to look at."

Raffles asked, "Are you apprenticing Jack to your art and mystery, Tom?"

"Well, his school's just broken up for the Christmas holidays, so he's running an errand or two," Bidwell said. "I expect I'll have to apprentice him soon, but he's a bright boy, and I'd keep him at school a few more years—and a better school than he's at now—if I could afford it."

"Education can be a problem," said Bidwell's client. "Take that Mr. Vyse-Halley I just mentioned. He'd like his boy to grow up with the earmark of a great school like Eton or Harrow on him, and heaven knows Vyse-Halley can afford it—he's a very rich man. But in making his pile, he's upset plenty of other people's applecarts. He's made enemies, Tom, so he's worried about his boy's safety. In a great school like Eton or Harrow, with five or six hundred other boys, what special protection would be possible? None. So he has to have his boy privately educated—keeps him at home, in charge of a stalwart tutor."

"We all have our problems, sir," said Bidwell sympathetically.

Raffles offered me a Sullivan from his cigarette-case. I noticed that he was looking thoughtful, and when, duly trimmed, we left Shilligan's together, he said, "Bunny, if you've no luncheon engagement today, be my guest. There's a man I'd like to have a word with, and we may find him at the Legbefore."

The Legbefore Club, which had a membership composed of cricketers, was not far off, and there we found the man Raffles was looking for just sitting down to lunch. He was a donnish-looking fellow in his thirties, gangling and pipesmoking.

"Trevor runs a private school, Bunny, down in Somerset," said Raffles, when he had introduced us. "Mind if we share your table, Trevor?"

"Sit down," said the schoolmaster. "I'm told there's jugged venison on the menu."

"In that case," said Raffles, "I'll stand us a bottle of Beaune to go with it."

"Best news I've heard to-day," Trevor said. "I'm in London to make a round of the scholastic agencies to try to drum up a few new pupils, but I'm not having much luck."

"Yes, you told me you had a pupil problem, when I played cricket with you last summer," Raffles said. "Bunny, it's a shame. Knightsnade Hall School's a lovely old place."

"It needs at least a hundred boarding pupils to pay its way," Trevor said ruefully. "Last term I was down to sixty. For next term—Spring term—I've got exactly forty-two."

"Then I may have good news for you," said Raffles. "Have you ever thought of offering parents a special attraction?"

"What kind of attraction?"

"Security," said Raffles. "Consider, Trevor, the number of wealthy parents there must be in this country who're having their boys 'privately educated.' Why? Because they want to? Certainly not. Most parents of means would far rather have their boys grow up at a famous school. Who in England can mistake, for example, an Old Etonian? He bears an inimitable earmark, the earmark that admits him by sight to the folds of the golden fleece—Society, Diplomacy, the Cabinet, the Bishopricks, the Peerage itself. Very well. Then what stops such parents from getting that priceless earmark for their boys? Simply this, Trevor—fear! They're parents who've made enemies—and who therefore feel they need special security for their sons."

"The sins," Trevor said thoughtfully, "'of the fathers—'"

"Exactly," said Raffles. "And the great schools simply can't specialize in Security. But a school like yours could."

"Maybe," said the schoolmaster. "But look here, Raffles—all right, a school like mine, with few pupils—yes, we could make security pretty watertight. But what good would a run-of-the-mill boarding-school like mine be to parents who want for their boys the unique earmark of Eton, say, or Harrow?"

"Ah, that's the question," said Raffles. "I have an inkling of the answer, but it needs a certain amount of research. Let's say no more about it for the present. Here comes the Wine List."

As cover for my sometimes lucrative involvement in the clandestine side of A. J. Raffles's ostensibly leisured life, I dabbled in freelance journalism, and one rainy afternoon fairly early in the New Year I was in my Mount Street flat, trying to compose an article with the Manders touch, when the doorbell jangled.

My heart lurched. Never, since my association with Raffles, had I known an easy conscience, and I opened my front door warily, to see standing on the landing an individual with a paunch, a brindled, square-cut beard, a German-looking hat and cape, and an aspect of bristling hostility.

"Herr Manders? Dr. Karl Eisner." He whipped from his cape a magazine, rolled up, and stabbed me in the chest with it. "This is your work—this mendacious work on Bavarian mountain sport?" Before I could answer, he swept me roughly to one side and strode into my living-room shouting, "*Schlim! Sehr schlim, Herr Manders! Pah!*"

He hurled the magazine into my wastepaper basket, and turned, taking off his hat from a brindled wig cut stiffly *en brosse*. "No offence, of course, Bunny," said Raffles.

I was so furious that I could have brained him, but he checked me with a peremptory flourish of his ribboned *pince-nez*.

"Later, Bunny," he said. "Here, take this visiting-card—a Press card in the name of Parker, Gilbert Parker."

"What do I need this for?" I said, bewildered.

"Credentials," said Raffles. "We have an appointment at five o'clock, near Cadogan Gardens—at the house of Mr. Victor Vyse-Halley."

"Vyse-Halley?" Into my mind flashed a memory of the conversation at S. Shilligan's. "Oh, dear God!" I said.

I hated Raffles's way of catching me off guard like this, but he hustled me out and into a hansom, and as we jingled off through the waning light to Cadogan Gardens, he stroked his padded midriff and fluffed up his beard.

"I think I'll grow a real one," he said. "I'm getting used to them, Bunny. I was visiting orphanages over Christmas, playing Santa Claus, so I wore a white one then."

As he declined to enlarge upon this, let alone brief me as to his immediate intentions, my nerves were highly strung as a butler admitted us to the imposing, gaslit hall of the Vyse-Halley residence, spirited away our visiting-cards on a salver, and returned to conduct us into a handsome library and the presence of Mr. Victor Vyse-Halley, a smallish, sharp-featured man, immaculately dressed, with sleek black hair and ferrety eyes.

"I was expecting," he said, standing up behind an impressive desk, "only a Dr. Eisner."

Raffles, with a stiff bow, said, "Herr Parker is responsible for

the publicity of Knightswade Hall School."

"Very well. Sit down." Vyse-Halley took up from the desk a letter to which, I saw, two photographs and some printed clippings were attached. "Dr. Eisner, I have your letter here. I require to know how you came by this photograph of my son Vernon."

"It vos taken," said Raffles, "unbeknownst to the boy and his tutor, as they vos setting off for a horse ride in Hyde Park."

"Then I consider it a damnable liberty!"

"It vos done, Herr Vyse, in order to provide you, in conjunction with that other photograph, with a demonstration."

"H'm!" Vyse-Halley scowled at the two photographs. "Admittedly, there's a measure of resemblance here. Who is this other boy?"

I knew instantly it must be Tom Bidwell's boy, and I swallowed with a dry throat as Raffles said, "A mere nothing boy, Herr Vyse—offspring of a nobody father."

"H'm," said Vyse-Halley. "Now, Dr. Eisner, these clippings attached to your letter, these advertisements appearing in this week's scholastic journals—they describe Knightswade Hall as the only private school offering specialized security."

"In England, *ja*. In Bavaria, however, the prototype Eisner system school exists already." The savant put on his *pince-nez*. "It exists, Herr Vyse, in the interests of the sons of men of great enterprises—great industrialists, iron and steelmasters, barons of finance and armaments. Such men—powerful, wealthy—often have envious enemies. Such, alas, is the way of the world! Hence, Herr Vyse, for the convenience of such great men, exists the Eisner system—as in my letter there confidentially explained."

"And you're now," said Vyse-Halley, "introducing your system into England?"

"In conjunction with the headmaster of Knightswade Hall School, *ja*."

"I-see," said Vyse-Halley. "And your proposal, as I understand it, is that I enter this—this nothing boy at Knightswade Hall School using the name of and as though he were in fact my son?"

"With due publicity given to that event, Herr Vyse—for vich purpose, as also to publish articles about the special security uniquely provided by Knightswade Hall School, the expert journalist, Herr Parker here, is retained. Thus, Herr Vyse, the attention of would-be malefactors is misled to an impregnable school where they believe your boy is—"

"Though in fact," said Vyse-Halley, "I've really enrolled him at Eton, say, or Harrow, arranging with the school authorities there for him to be known by a pseudonym?"

"Incognito, *ja*, his true name to be disclosed only at his graduation, by which time the earmark of the great school is, in perfect safety, indelibly stamped upon him."

"Extraordinary," said Vyse-Halley. "And the cost to myself of this—this decoy service?"

"Simply to underwrite a sound but undistinguished education for the understudy boy, Herr Vyse, by paying his board and tuition fees at Knightswade Hall School."

"And what do *you* get out of this—this Eisner system?" said Vyse-Halley, with a ferrety look.

"I get fee-paying pupils for Knightswade Hall School, in which I have a financial interest." The savant smiled. "Vun swallow, Herr Vyse, does not make a summer. So! Already I have arranged three similar combinations."

Suddenly, the sweat starting in my palms, I realised why Raffles had been visiting orphanages.

"So, Herr Vyse," he now continued, "vy not make a simple test? The Spring term at Knightswade Hall opens on Thursday next. Vy not, then, yourself personally deliver there this understudy boy—as your son Vernon?"

"Though actually," said Vyse-Halley, "keeping Vernon himself well guarded at home with his tutor?"

"For the present, *ja*. Then perhaps, by midsummer, if all goes smooth and vell at the high-security school, you vill have gained confidence in the Eisner system and feel able at last to enroll your son, incognito, at Eton or Harrow—to his great social advantage."

"H'm!" Vyse-Halley rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then opened a drawer of his desk and took out a box. "Would you gentlemen care for a cigar?"

The opening day of the Spring term found me, on Raffles's instructions, at Knightswade Hall School, a fine old Elizabethan house standing in some thirty acres of Somerset parkland surrounded by a high wall.

I had with me a Press photographer of my acquaintance, who duly photographed, on the school steps, an elegant Mrs. Paula Paradix, a Mr. Barrington Strang, a Sir Hume Crowe, and Mr. Victor Vyse-Halley in the act of parting from their alleged "sons."

As soon as the photograph appeared, in weekly journals devoted to the doings of prominent persons, I rushed copies round to Raffles's rooms in The Albany, just off Piccadilly.

"Well done, Bunny," he said, pleased with my efforts.

"Young Jack Bidwell and the three orphans were pretty bewildered," I told him.

"They'll soon settle down," Raffles said. "They're bright boys. I've guaranteed them five years, all found, at Knightswade Hall, the only condition being that they temporarily use the names I've specified. Tom Bidwell jumped at the offer. As for the three orphans, the orphanages concerned—which are supported by voluntary but meagre contributions—were glad to get rid of the boys."

"I had a hard time," I said, "urging Vyse-Halley, Crowe, and Barrington Strang to put a bit of warmth into their farewell hugs of their 'sons,' but Mrs. Paradix really threw herself into the part."

"So I see from this photograph," said Raffles, "but curb the lump in your throat, Bunny. She's an ex-actress—now the kept lady of a peer. She's brought many a man to bankruptcy, which is why she's afraid to send her boy, apple of her eye, to Eton or Harrow, much as she'd like to—at her peer's expense." He offered me a cigarette. "Don't worry, I've fixed it with Trevor that our boys'll be well guarded."

"Has Trevor no qualms about all this?"

"In view of his financial difficulties," said Raffles, "he's content, in the main, to be guided by me."

"But what's in this for us, Raffles?" I said. "That's what I don't see."

"You will," said Raffles, "on April the First."

The date named, which was about halfway through the Spring term, turned out to be a typical first day of April, alternate sunshine and shower, and it found me once more, on Raffles's instructions, in the vicinity of Knightswade Hall School.

This time I was with Ivor Kern, the "fence" we did business with, a young-old man of melancholy aspect and cynical temperament. We had hired a closed carriage, which now, with its two horses, was standing stationary in a lane that skirted a part of the school wall remote from the house.

Ivor was sitting on the driving-box, holding the reins, and I was standing on the box in order to spy into the school park through the branches of a huge old oak on the other side of the wall. I was

keeping my eye on a clump of trees in a hollow about a hundred yards off in the grassy park.

The horses stamped restlessly, tossing their heads with a jingle of harness, and Kern asked, "See anything yet, Manders?"

"A few deer browsing," I said, "that's all."

Almost as I spoke, the deer lifted their heads sharply, then began to trot away in alarm as a running man came into sight. It was Trevor, the gangling headmaster. Bareheaded, wearing the scanty, mud-spattered attire of a cross-country runner, he jogtrotted towards the hollow, occasionally scattering fragments of torn paper from a satchel he carried. He vanished into the hollow, reappeared on its far side, then passed from my view along a path hedged in by thickets of rhododendrons.

"Any minute now, Ivor," I warned.

Sure enough, after a brief interval, a running boy came into sight, following the paper trail. I recognised him at once as Tom Bidwell's boy Jack, alias Vernon Vyse-Halley. Sturdily jogging, Jack vanished into the hollow. He did not emerge from it.

Two other boys, strangers to me, came jogging into sight. They vanished into the hollow, emerged from it on the far side, and passed from view along the path through the rhododendrons.

Another boy came jogging into sight. I recognised him as the orphan who was understudying Sir Hume Crowe's son, Sebastian. He jogged down into the hollow. He did not reappear from it.

A group of four boys now jogged into sight, vanished into the hollow, reappeared on its far side, and passed from view. Next appeared our other two orphans, the understudies to Barrington Strang, Jr., and Mrs. Paradix's boy, Peregrine. They jogged down into the hollow. They did not reappear.

A straggle of about eight boys came into sight, safely traversed the enigmatic hollow, and as the last of them was swallowed up by the rhododendrons, four furtive figures crept out of the hollow.

"Stand by, Ivor!" I said.

Bent double, Jack Bidwell and the three orphans darted towards the oak tree through whose branches I was spying. Climbing sounds came from the other side of the wall. The next moment four flushed, excited faces were looking down at me from the branches.

"Please, sir," panted Jack Bidwell, alias Vernon Vyse-Halley, "Dr. Eisner called to us. He was hiding in the trees in the hollow. He says this is an April Fool joke on Mr. Trevor."

"That's right," I said. "Come on, quick, I'll help you down from there."

"It's afternoon," said the "Sebastian Crowe" orphan doubtfully. "You can't do an April Fool after midday."

"Dr. Eisner says you can if it's a Leap Year," said the "Barrington Strang, Jr." orphan.

"And this is a Leap Year," I said, "so come on, let's see you leap off that wall. I'll catch you."

One by one I got the boys down from their perches.

"Mr. Trevor'll go berserk when he can't find us," said the "Peregrine Paradix" orphan.

"Dr. Eisner'll fix it for you," I said. "He has a pull with Mr. Trevor. Come on now, there's a change of clobber inside the carriage. Jump in and get those muddy togs off."

With the boys safely inside the carriage I resumed my seat beside Kern on the box.

"Where now, Manders?" he said.

"Taunton," I said. "And don't spare the horses!"

At Taunton I had booked snug diggings for the boys and arranged for a festive repast to be prepared for them by the motherly landlady. As soon as I had seen them settled, gloating, around a table groaning with delectable pastries, I left the boys in Kern's charge and headed for the station.

There was no sign of Raffles there, and I guessed he already had caught a train up to London. By nine P.M. I was back there myself and in my Mount Street flat, but was only on my second whisky-and-soda, sorely needed, when the doorbell jangled.

It was Raffles, in his Dr. Eisner guise.

"Come on, Bunny," he said. "The conference is at nine-thirty."

"Conference?" I said. "What conference?"

"On discovering the abduction of the boys," said Raffles, "the headmaster immediately dispatched his associate—myself, Dr. Eisner—to London, to consult with Mr. Vyse-Halley, Mrs. Paradix, Sir Hume Crowe, and Mr. Barrington Strang. I've just called on each of them, shown them the note, and explained the necessity of a conference. It's arranged for nine thirty, at Vyse-Halley's house. I've left the note with him—for study."

"Note?" I said. "What note is this?"

"The note that was found in the letter-box at the school, just after the paper-chase." Raffles adjusted his *pince-nez* on his nose. "The ransom note, Herr Parker!"

I saw the note the moment we were shown again, shortly after 9:30 p.m., into the Vyse-Halley library, for the ferrety financier brandished the missive at the savant.

"Not a penny!" Vyse-Halley shouted. "Not one penny, Eisner! This ransom demand is your problem, not ours!"

Already gathered here were the beautiful but notorious Mrs. Paradix, the dissolute Sir Hume Crowe, the portly Mr. Barrington Strang, and a youngish, monocled man of vacuous aspect whom I took to be Mrs. Paradix's tame peer.

"Your damned system's collapsed, Eisner," boomed Barrington Strang, "and it's up to *you* what's done about it!"

"Five thousand pounds demanded for each boy," said Vyse-Halley. "The money, in used currency notes of small denominations, to be placed in an attaché-case, and the case deposited at eleven thirty tomorrow night in the Left Luggage Office, Paddington Station. Instructions regarding the deposit receipt will be sent to the school later. On final collection of the ransom money the boys will be returned to the school."

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Sir Hume Crowe, "and it's for you and the school to find it, Eisner."

"Gentlemen," said the savant pathetically, "ve have no such money."

"Well, that's too bad," said the exquisite Mrs. Paradix, "but your grubby little urchin boys are not *our* pigeon. *Our* boys are perfectly safe. It's not *our* boys who've been abducted—the abductors only think they are."

"If it vos your boys missing," said the savant sadly, "you would pay the ransom, *nein*?"

Vyse-Halley said sharply, "That would be a totally different situation!"

The savant nodded, sighed heavily, adjusted his *pince-nez*, looked at me. "Vell, Herr Parker, it seems ve must go to the police—in vich case, vill it be possible to keep this matter from the newspapers, for the sake of Frau Paradix and the gentlemen?"

Before I could answer, Sir Hume Crowe barked, "*Our* sake? What d'you mean by that?"

"For your own boys," said the savant gloomily, "you would pay the ransom, *ja, ja*. But for the poor understudy boys, whom you made use of for your own boys' benefit and who now are in danger as a result, you wealthy people vill not one penny pay, *nein, nein*." He stood up. "Ah, vell, such is the vay of the world! Ve vill keep

it from the newspapers—if possible. Come, Herr Parker.”

We turned to the door.

“Wait!” said Vyse-Halley.

We turned back. Glances were passing among the plutocrats.

“Dr. Eisner,” said Vyse-Halley, controlling himself with an obvious effort, “there are, perhaps, marginal issues to this damnable matter. Sit down.”

The conference then really began. It was not an edifying session. Bitter remarks were hurled at the savant, who hung his humiliated head. But it was at last agreed by the angry plutocrats that, to avoid publicity highly damaging to their reputations, they had no option but to finance the release of the wretched understudy boys.

To this end Vyse-Halley, Sir Hume Crowe, and Mr. Barrington Strang would on the morrow each draw from his respective bank £5000 in currency notes, while Mrs. Paradix’s £5000 would be provided by her peer.

The quintet, it was agreed, would foregather again next evening at 9:30, with their contributions, at the Vyse-Halley house. Vyse-Halley would himself deposit the £20,000 in an attaché-case at the Paddington Left Luggage Office at 11:30 P.M., as specified in the ransom note. Dr. Eisner would return to the school and, as soon as the abductors’ instructions regarding the Left Luggage receipt were received there, would forward them by special messenger to Vyse-Halley.

On conclusion of this arrangement we were coldly dismissed.

“So far, Bunny, so good,” Raffles said, as we walked away through Cadogan Gardens. “By the Eisner system we’ve arranged for a known sum to be present at a known place at a known hour. Remains now to collect it by the Raffles system—subject only to one vital point.”

“What point?” I asked, puzzled.

“A point,” said Raffles, “of morality.”

True to the Raffles system we effected an entrance, at a little before 9:30 the following evening, into the small back yard of the Vyse-Halley house. We found some narrow stone steps which led down to a basement area and a back door. This proved to be bolted, but there was a small window beside it. Forcing the catch of the window with an instrument he carried, Raffles opened the window, thrust in his head, and struck a match.

"Excellent, Bunny," he reported, withdrawing his head. "It's a cellar with coal and wood in it and the usual taps of the gas- and water-mains. Vyse-Halley, as host, is of course already in the house—with his five thousand. Listen, I think I hear the second five thousand just coming."

I held my breath, listening. From round at the front of the house sounded a clip-clop and jingles as a carriage arrived.

"That makes ten thousand," said Raffles. "Shh! Listen!"

Again sounded an approaching clip-clop and jingle.

"Fifteen thousand," said Raffles. "Mrs. Paradix and her peer will come together, so there should be one more arrival."

Sure enough I heard again a clip-clop and jingle.

"Twenty thousand," said Raffles. "Right! In we go!"

As I clambered in cautiously after him through the small window, his gloved hand gripped mine and, in the pitch darkness, guided it to a tap.

"This is the tap of the gas-main," he whispered. "It turns to the right, for 'Off.' Stay here and don't let go of it."

"When do I turn it?" I whispered.

"That depends entirely on the point of morality I mentioned," Raffles said. "I'm now going to creep up through the house. Vyse-Halley and Company will almost certainly be in the library. I must contrive to overhear their conversation. If the point of morality goes against us, I'll rejoin you here and we depart empty-handed. On the other hand, if the point of morality justifies my doing so, I shall shout 'Off!' In that event, turn the tap firmly to the right, then depart as fast as you can go. I'll join you at Ivor Kern's place—all being well. Is that quite clear?"

"Perfectly," I assured him, my heart pounding.

He was gone, silent as a cat.

How long I stood there in the darkness, firmly gripping the gas-tap with a gloved hand, I hardly knew. My heart thumped. Would the butler be in his pantry, out of the way? Was Raffles, alone in the hall with its gas-globed chandelier, standing with an ear pressed to the door of the library? What was the point of morality he was so concerned with?

I swallowed with a parched throat. Suddenly I thought I heard steps in the basement passage. Some parlourmaid, perhaps, with a candlestick in her hand, coming to fill a coal-scuttle? And me here, black-masked and silk-hatted, at the gas-main—

Oh, dear God! I thought. What should I do when the poor girl,

neat in her evening black, with starched white apron and cap, opened her eyes wide at sight of me, and her mouth wider to emit a piercing—

"Off!" shouted a voice from somewhere above, thin with distance.

For a moment of panic I wondered wildly if the shout were as much a figment of my imagination as the parlourmaid. I decided it could not have been. I quickly turned off the gas, scrambled out of the window, tore off my mask, raced across the back yard and along the tradesmen's entrance alley.

Gaining Cadogan Gardens, I was lucky enough to pick up a hansom almost at once and, within half an hour, reached the refuge of Ivor Kern's cluttered sitting-room over his antique shop in King's Road, Chelsea.

"Where's Raffles?" said Kern.

"Busy in the dark," I said. "For heaven's sake give me a drink!"

I had scarcely tossed off four fingers of Kern's brandy when the doorbell jangled. It was Raffles. Walking into the room, he tossed an attaché-case onto the table.

"An easy crib," he said. "I had the hall to myself, Bunny. Vyse-Halley and Company were in the library. I heard every word that was said. I was waiting to hear a certain suggestion that I felt pretty sure would be made. I fancied it would come from Vyse-Halley, but actually it came from the female of the species, Mrs. Paradix."

"What suggestion?" I said, breathless.

"The suggestion," said Raffles, "that they go to the police, tell their story, explain that they *had* produced and deposited at the Left Luggage Office the ransom for the release of the poor under-study boys—but had also set a trap for the abductors."

"A trap?" My scalp began to tingle.

"She suggested that they *mark the notes*. And the others agreed." Raffles smiled grimly. "Would they have risked marking the notes if it had been their *own* sons at stake? Would they?"

"Never!" I said.

"Exactly," said Raffles. "The point of morality! When they agreed to mark the notes, that was my cue—and my justification. So I shouted 'Off' And the lights went out. And I went in. And in the darkness and confusion—"

He waved a hand at the currency notes, which Kern was examining through a microscope. "They aren't marked," Kern said.

"Thanks to Bunny's skilled hand at the gas-main," said Raffles. "And Vyse-Halley and Company won't go to the police now. They'll realise all too clearly that what Vyse-Halley called the 'marginal issues' would result in invidious newspaper comment and a lot of malicious gossip. That would destroy any hopes they may have of finding some means, ultimately, of getting their boys into Eton or Harrow. The governors of such schools are pretty particular." He lighted a Sullivan. "Our *protégés* can revert to their real names soon. Ivor, did you get the boys back to Knightswade Hall in good spirits?"

"They had no complaints," Kern said dryly.

"To-morrow," said Raffles, "telegrams will be received from the school by Vyse-Halley and Company, explaining that the boys have been traced and recovered, and no ransom need be paid. Of course, if in the meantime Vyse-Halley and Company have unfortunately lost the money through the chance incursion of an unknown burglar—well, one can but sympathise."

"Quite," I said.

"Five years' board and tuition fees, paid in advance, for four boys, plus a modest endowment to put the school on a sounder footing," Raffles said, "will account for one half of that money."

"And the other half?" I asked, rather anxiously.

Raffles gave me such a droll glance that Kern laughed aloud in his cynical way, and I myself realised the foolishness of the question.

I looked at the sheaves of currency notes on the table, and drew in my breath, deeply.

"And all," I said, marvelling, "from a haircut at S. Shilligan's!"

"As to that, Bunny, nothing so becomes a man," said A. J. Raffles, reaching for the decanter, "as a neat trim."

"Q"

Rod Reed

Give Me Lib, or Give Me Death

In which you will meet, in order of appearance and among others, Boston Blondie, Nora Woof, Simone Tempter, Hillary Quinn, Goldilock Homes, Samantha Shovel, Micheline Hammerlock, Charlotte Chin, Hercula Parrot, May Gray, and Violet Pantz (surely you have met them all before!) in the first SECs meeting (Society for the Elimination of Criminals) held secretly in McNertny's Wonderful Boozeria . . . a very funny story and a delightful change of pace . . .

Detectives: A BEVY OF DETECTIVES!

A furtive figure moved through the dark night toward the back door of McNertny's Wonderful Boozeria, Men Only, Closed Mondays. It was Monday. A ring of skeleton keys was produced, and the third one opened the door.

Using a pen flashlight, the intruder went through the kitchen into the main salon of the saloon. Dusty blackout blinds, left over from the war before last, were swiftly drawn. Not until then was the light switch clicked.

Even so, the illumination in McNertny's was not very bright, but it did reveal the trespasser as a striking, tow-headed woman, under 30 in years but over 30 in chest. She glided to the front door and unlocked it. Three more furtive figures entered.

They were followed at intervals by what might be described as a small parade of furtive figures. When a dozen or so were inside, the tow-head said, "I believe we're all here except the guest of honor, who isn't due for half an hour. We can do a little organizing in that time. By default, I'm chairperson pro tem. After we deal with the preliminaries we can elect a permanent leader. Most of you know me, but for the rest I'll introduce myself. I'm called Boston Blondie."

A fat lady muttered, "Yes, dearie, and I can remember when

you were Boston Brunettie." She thought she had muttered it under her breath. However, Boston Blondie had exceptionally keen ears. She turned a wide lip smile and glacier eyes toward the chubby one and said, "You're right as usual, madame. And, of course, we all recognize you. You are Nora Woof, the stout detective. Everyone here feels privileged that you could tear yourself away from your penthouse where you potter about potting prize petunias."

"Pfui!" retorted Nora. "Can you never get anything right? I raise rhododendrons."

"If you say so. Of course, I defer to the dean of distaff dickettes. One would not argue with the oldest living sleuth."

Some of those present were tickled with the exchange and waited eagerly for Nora's riposte. Others thought, if somebody doesn't *do* something, this will disintegrate into a meeting of a ladies' bowling league.

One who felt that way stood up. Above her head was a glowing halo. "The horticulture discussion between our eminent colleagues is of absorbing interest. Yet I think it should be postponed until we have disposed of the question of why this session was called in the first place. By the way, I'm known as Simone Tempter."

Nora, annoyed at the interruption of her no doubt devastating riposte, grumbled, but inaudibly this time, "I know you, Simone Tempter. You are called The Scent because of your exotic perfume."

"The chair recognizes Ms. Tempter," said Boston Blondie. "You have a good question and I'll answer it. Our meeting was called because we female detectives are sick and tired of being relegated to second-class detectiveship. We want recognition. We feel we are better snoopers than any men!"

Cries of "Right on!" and "You seddit!" and "How true!" and "Up the girls!" greeted these remarks.

Blondie continued, "So a few of us have decided to try to work up an organization. The Women's Lib movement hasn't given any consideration to *our* problem. We must fight our own battle."

"I quite agree," agreed Hillary Quinn.

"You may count on my support. It's elementary," declared Goldilock Homes.

"I back you one thousand per cent," asserted Samantha Shovel.

But the meeting did not go smoothly. It is an unfortunate truth that, although ladies may be superior to gentlemen, their meet-

ings never go any more smoothly—and sometimes less.

There was bickering about the proposed name of the organization. It was suggested that they call themselves the Society for the Elimination of Criminals, or SEC.

"I don't like that," somebody objected. "Punsters will call us the Opposite SECs."

"Or the Fair SECs."

"Or the Unfair SECs."

Calm Hillary Quinn stood up and said, "Ladies, the matter of a name for our organization is too important to be settled hastily. Let's hold that in abeyance. Perhaps our chairperson can appoint a committee to study the matter and report at our next meeting, if any."

"I second the motion," said Micheline Hammerlock.

Charlotte Chin and Ms. Motto nodded, both inscrutably.

The chairperson appointed a committee of three, then continued, "Whatever our organization may be called eventually, there are matters that demand our attention right now. In the first place, we need money—"

Chairs scraped back and a number of the furtive figures headed for the door.

"Wait!" cried the temporary chairperson. "We're not going to take up a collection. We have a mystery, and if we can solve it, we'll clear a cool million dollars for our organization without any of us having to donate a thin dime. And I'm confident that even if we can't solve that mystery, our guest of honor can."

But the guest of honor was about to have a problem of her own.

Hercula Parrot, the famous Belgian detective, came out of Le Chat et le Violin, New York's finest French restaurant. She peered impatiently left and right.

"Cordon bleu!" she exclaimed. "It is an irony. I, the greatest sleuth in all the world who can easily find the missing crown jewels or the stolen eye of the idol, I, Hercula Parrot, cannot find a taxicab!"

A young man approached her and tipped his hat. "Perhaps I can help you, Miss," said he.

Hercula looked at him shrewdly and observed, "You have on the uniform. I deduce that you are a gendarme, no?"

"No, ma'am. I'm only a humble Boy Scout. It's my duty to do a

good deed every day. Please let me help you. You're my last chance before bedtime."

"A Scout Boy, eh? I have heard of you. You know how to find the north side of a tree. Can it be that you are also able to locate the north side, or any side, of a taxicab?"

"Sure. Come along."

Had Hercula but known, this fellow was not a Boy Scout at all. He was a sinister character known to the underworld as M.T.M., or Moe the Mimic. He had disguised himself just to fool her. Perhaps the eminent sleuth should have noticed he was much older than a Boy Scout. But the night was dark and besides, out of vanity, Hercula refused to wear the glasses prescribed for all people who have little gray hairs as well as little gray cells.

The "Boy Scout" put two fingers in his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. As if by magic a cab appeared. Moe opened the rear door and Hercula started climbing in, turning her head to the "Scout" to say, "Merci, mon petit." Once inside she was surprised to note that the back seat was already occupied by a dis-franchised middle linebacker. It was but the work of a moment for him to gag Hercula and bind her leg and foot.

The cab sped to a handy abandoned warehouse. Inside, Moe the Mimic traded garb with Hercula as his henchmen kept the famous lady detective covered with a gun, out of a sense of decency, no doubt. Leaving her, they then sped to McNertny's Wonderful Boozeria.

Meanwhile, back at the SECs meeting, the sexy sleuths were overcome with curiosity and greed about that million-dollar mystery. Their chairperson had explained to them, "We can collect a million-dollar reward if we solve the robbery at the United Nations.

"As you must be aware, the United Notions, manufacturer of toys, games, and novelties, was the victim of a gigantic robbery last week. The story was in all the papers. Still, it won't hurt any of us to be refreshed on the details, so let me sum up briefly."

Consulting notes she had made in a genuine detective notebook that had come with her genuine private-eye kit, Boston Blondie outlined the crime:

Two officials of the company were in the counting room counting up the money from the sale of a new doll that had replaced Barbie in the affections of little girls. The doll didn't say,

"Mama." It said, "Oh, mother, don't be gross! Why are you and daddy so square?" And when the doll was wound up it went off and joined a commune.

Naturally the doll was a runaway best-seller and close to a billion dollars was in the counting room, most of it in million-dollar bills. A masked gunman entered, ordered the treasurer and his assistant to lie face down on the floor, scooped up the money, and departed. The treasurer had cleverly fallen so that his head was just above a secret alarm button which he pressed with his nose.

Immediately all exits from the building were sealed off. There was no possible way for the robber to escape. Security guards kept everybody inside until the police arrived. A search found the thief's mask in the Stuffed People Department on a life-sized figure of the Lone Ranger. The gun was located behind a water cooler. It turned out not to be a real gun but only a "Little Kid's Napalm Pistol," one of the hottest items in the United Notions line.

Everybody was searched to the skin before being allowed to leave the premises. Not a single million-dollar bill was found. One detective thought he had earned promotion when he discovered several packets of bills hidden under crumpled Kleenex in a wastebasket. But they turned out to be only play money, regularly used in the company's famous game, Monotony.

An employee, identified as Philip D. Box, explained that the play money had been discarded because it was defective. It was his job to see that only first-class phony bucks were included in the game sets.

"Police claim to be following up hot leads," concluded Boston Blondie, "but the truth is, they don't have a single clue to the identity of the robber or what he did with the loot."

"Hoo, boy! If we can solve this one we'll put that male chauvinist Commissioner of Police in his male chauvinist place!"

"Female detectives will get rightful recognition at last!"

"And don't forget the reward."

Charlotte Chin raised her voice above the general babble. "Sisters in sleuthery, please to remember ancient saying of Confucius: 'Never count your Egg Foo Yung until it is in the platter.' I humbly suggest we not spend reward until we have solved case."

This speech had a sobering effect. A number of those present admitted to themselves that they were just as baffled as the male chauvinist Commissioner. Several, however, looked wise. And

Nora Woof, who appeared to be asleep, was in fact only concentrating.

Hillary Quinn arose, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She was, in fact, an amateur detective, her profession being that of novelist and short-story writer. But the pros knew there was nothing amateurish about her crime-fighting, so they listened with respectful attention as she spoke.

"Our honorable Oriental colleague has made a good point. We must get cracking. Now I have a suggestion. Let me put details of the caper into a story. Then I'll stop the action with an italicized paragraph saying, 'Now, reader, you have all the clues. What is the solution?'"

"What good will that do?" somebody asked.

"My readers are all very smart," said Hillary. "They will solve the case. We just ask one of them how she did it."

Nora Woof opened her eyes, puffed her lips, and came as near to smiling as she ever did. "It would work, too," she muttered. "Unfortunately, by the time your story got published somebody else probably would have grabbed the reward. Anyway, I'm sure you are putting us on, dear Hillary, and just, by the way, have got in a plug for your next book, *Murders at the United Nations*."

"There are no murders in this case," somebody observed.

"Don't worry," said Nora, closing her eyes again. "Our fictioneer colleague has a wonderful imagination."

A discreet tap on the front door was heard. May Gray, who was nearest, opened the portal and Moe the Mimic entered McNertney's. An amazing transformation had taken place. He looked so much like Hercula Parrot that even Tabitha Grisley couldn't have told the difference. Moreover, he was able to pitch his voice in a feminine register—he had been a boy soprano in a choir before he turned to a life of crime.

"Here's our guest of honor!" exclaimed the chairperson. "Mme. Parrot, we are most honored to have you join us."

Moe, dressed as Hercula, responded, "Zut alors! Mesdames, it is I who am honored to be with you, the second-best detectives in all the world."

"Who's the first best?" asked Nora.

"Le modesty prevents me to say."

Several whispered, "That's typical of Parrot, by Georgiana!"

A résumé covering the purpose of the gathering plus details of the million-dollar mystery was given for the guest's benefit.

"It is a case beaucoup intéressant," said the bogus Hercula. "Of course, I have used the little gray cells. I know exactly who is le miscreant and where ze loot reposes itself."

Nora opened her baleful eyes and said, "Okay, if you're so brainy, tell us."

"Ah, mes amies, I could do that of a truth. But would it not be better if you, the leading detectives of Etats Unis and Britain Great, work it out for yourselves?"

Some signs of dismay were heard, but not from Hillary Quinn who, looking amused, said, "Frenchy, you are kind to give us our chance. And I, for one, accept the challenge. For starters, I say it was an inside job and the robber was a man."

"Cherchez l'homme! You use the little gray cells tres formidable. But what is le nomme of le homme?"

"That's easy, Hercula," declared Nora Woof. "Obviously it's Philip D. Box."

"Mon dieu et filet mignon!" cried the phony Hercula. "You are le wizard. But now let us see if you can also tell where le spondulix is cached?"

"She's a phony," whispered Nora to Hillary.

Hillary agreed. "But let's just be positive."

She suggested a smoke during further mediation and tossed a lighter into the lap of "Hercula Parrot" who clapped knees together as it landed. Samantha Shovel told "Hercula," "My contact lenses have fallen out. Would you thread this needle for me?" Moe obliged. Then, as if on cue, Micheline Hammer handed an ashtray to the guest and requested, "Would you throw this at yonder rat? I sprained my arm." The ashtray blammed the rat squarely in the noggin, giving him a headache.

Boston Blondie, as chairperson, observed these actions. At a nod from Hillary she resumed her duties as conductor of the meeting and recognized Goldilock Homes who, wearing her doestalker cap and fiddling on a violin, mused, "Pure deductive reasoning tells us that, since the stolen money has not yet left the building, Philip D. Box must have hidden it in a Monotony box, replacing the play money."

"That's it!" drawled Violet Pantz. "Later, after the hue and cry dies down, he plans to mail it to himself!"

"Please to be complimented on le magnifique use of your little gray cells," exclaimed the bogus Hercula. "That is exactly the solution I myself worked out." She beamed at the group. Then

frowning, looking at her watch, "Chevrolet coopay! I'm late for, how do you say, ze appointment. Pardon mille fois but I must be leaving!"

Nora Woof imposed her bulk between "Hercula" and the door. Micheline stepped forward with a ladylike fist cocked. Samantha slipped a derringer out of her bra holster. Boston Blondie snatched the wig from the imposter's bald head.

"Hah! I recognize you!" came from Simone Tempter, the Scent. "You're Moe the Mimic!"

Hell hath no fury like a bunch of women from whom you have tried to bilk a million dollars, and Moe knew it. He gave up meekly, told them where he had left the real Hercula, and submitted quietly to handcuffs when a pair of sturdy meter maids from headquarters came to lead him off to a little gray cell.

Micheline and Samantha went to round up the suspect, Philip D. Box, who, when confronted, confessed readily, saying he had stolen the money for his poor old widowed mother who had suffered recent heavy losses at bingo.

Meanwhile, a committee of six, headed by Boston Blondie, went to collect the bounty. The stolen money was, indeed, found in a Monotony box and the head of the company, Herbert J. Monotony, gladly handed over \$1,000,000 after first asking the ladies if they wouldn't rather have the reward in yo-yos.

Femme detectives are different from homme detectives and viva la difference. But in one respect they are the same. After a case is ended, they sit around and hash over the clues. The genuine guest of honor, who had been rescued from the abandoned warehouse, now joined them.

Goldilock Homes started. "The sinister Moe kept his eyes on the lists of distinguished visitors to these shores. Hercula Parrot's name attracted his attention—what was she doing here? Using his specialty, he posed as a chambermaid and overheard a phone conversation relating to the secret SECs meeting and its purpose. His evil brain then concocted a plot diabolical in its simplicity. In disguise he would join us, pick our brains for the solution of the mystery, and then, with the excuse of a pressing engagement, rush off to collect the reward. The game was afoot!"

"And she came within an ace of getting away with it," Samantha Shovel said.

"Pfui!" pfui'd Nora Woof. "The moment that person walked in the door I spotted an impostor. In her coiffeur there was one hair out of place. The real Hercula is nothing if not neat."

"Of a certitude," agreed Mme. Parrot in person.

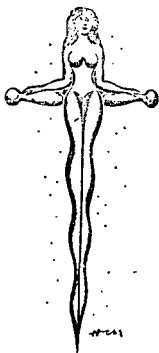
"And as a test I called her 'Frenchy,'" Hillary said. "There was no reaction. It's widely known that Hercula Parrot raises the roof if anybody implies that she is French rather than Belgian."

"Vraiment," said the guest of honor, in Belgian.

"And, of course, we then collaborated in a series of tests that proved beyond doubt the impostor was a male. He caught a cigarette lighter in his lap by banging his knees together, instead of separating the knees, the way one of us does; he threaded a needle by holding the thread still and bringing the needle up to it, instead of the other way round; and he threw an object at a rat in a manner worthy of Tom Seaver, a male baseball pitcher. All acts most unladylike. One of our greatest American books gave us these tipoffs."

"Quel book is that?"

"Why, of course, it's *The Adventures of Honeybear Finn* by Marcella Twain."



Norah Lofts

The Man on the Telephone

Norah Lofts was born in 1904 on a farm in Norfolk, England. When her father died in 1913 and her family moved to the "small though very old market town" of Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, Norah's life was "altered altogether." Today she lives again in Bury St. Edmunds, in an antique house whose architecture combines the Tudor, Queen Anne, and Georgian periods.

Mrs. Lofts's many novels include BLESS THIS HOUSE (a Literary Guild selection), THE HOUSE AT OLD VINE (also a Literary Guild selection), THE KING'S PLEASURE (about Katherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII), and THE CONCUBINE (about Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII).

The author's specialty is the historical romance, in which "she is more concerned with the psychology of her characters than with their swashbuckling adventures." However, the short story we now present is entirely different. In contrast, it is a contemporary story of suspense and panic, about a young wife at the end of Nine Days' Terror—nine days and nights of anonymous obscene phone calls . . .

Outside the house she paused and stared at it a moment, trying to see it as though she were a potential buyer making a preliminary inspection. It was not a pretty house, she knew, but it was solid, spacious, and quite well maintained. Below this surface thought, however, panic stirred even as she fumbled for her key.

At that moment the streetlamp on the corner sprang into light and everything outside its radiance grew suddenly darker. She opened the front door and reached in to snap on the lights. Then she hesitated, looking and listening, before stepping in and closing the door behind her. She turned and fastened the safety chain.

The hall was just as she had left it. On one side an oak chest bore a blue-and-white jar full of pink dahlias—the last of the sea-

son. Opposite stood the grandfather clock, mute now. On the floor was a Persian rug, faded and mended, but still good. Moving quietly, alert as some jungle creature, she went to the far end of the hall and into the kitchen.

Darkness stared in at the window over the sink and, still clutching her parcels, she went hurriedly and tugged the curtains closed, careful not to look at the window. A few days ago her reflection there had given her an awful fright.

With the curtains drawn the kitchen seemed cozy. They had spent rather more than they could afford on it, but Hal had said, "You'll be using the kitchen a lot, and the best is cheapest in the long run."

Long run. All the gleaming surfaces seemed to echo the phrase mockingly. They had lived there only six months and a few days when a sudden promotion had taken Hal to Wisborough, well out of commuting distance.

She put down her purchases and thought about a cup of tea, but she knew she could not rest until she had made her compulsive search of the house; and before she could do that she had to deaden her fear. She got the Scotch out of the living-room cupboard; there was only an inch or so left in the bottle, although she never touched more than one drink a day. She must remember to get a new bottle.

She swallowed the whisky with a little shudder and a grimace; she was not used to alcohol—what the people who have never known fear laughingly call "Dutch courage." Waiting for it to take effect she arranged the things she had bought. She was a neat and tidy person, and nine days of terror had not entirely changed her.

Now for it! She went into the hall and unlocked the door of the dining room, looked, listened, and then went in. It was an awkward room, just slightly too high for its size, but a dark-painted ceiling, a sideboard with a high back, a mirror hung horizontally, a clever arrangement of pictures, and a tall house-plant concealed this fault.

A colorful arrangement of flowers in the center of the table gave the room a lived-in air, though in fact she and Hal had not had a chance to eat in here. Two could sit comfortably in the kitchen, and what with the move and the alterations they had not yet had a chance to make friends and entertain. One of her troubles at the moment, for that matter, was that she was not suffi-

ciently acquainted with anyone to be able to confide her worries.

She went on, locking the door behind her. Living room next. She looked around, then drew the curtains closed. Here, too, she had done a good job making the room comfortable. When she and Hal had seen the house for the first time his reaction had been completely negative. "Honey, we can't live here. It's the dreariest place."

But she had seen its possibilities and had pointed out that it was the cheapest house they had seen. Hal replied that since they had to take a mortgage anyway it might as well be on some attractive place. Hal had a bit of a slaphappy attitude toward money. He would justify a minor extravagance—and some not so minor—with a grin, and the remark, "After all, it's only money!"

She sometimes thought that married to a woman less careful than herself, he would find himself in real financial trouble. In the case of the house he had given way to her insistence and, finally, after all the work she'd done on it, he'd said that he never would have believed it, it didn't look like the same place.

She did not lock the living room because the telephone was there. Hal called every evening.

She switched on the light which served the stairs and the upper landing. It was an awkward staircase: nine steps, then an abrupt turn, which had caused a great problem when they were moving beds in, and then eight steps more.

All was well in the master bedroom, in the adjoining bathroom, in the guest room, never used, in the little room that had served Hal partly as a dressing room and partly as a study; all was well even in the storage room that held their trunks and boxes, Hal's golf clubs, and a big old mirror which had been broken in the move. One night last week her own distorted reflection in that mirror had given her a scare similar to but worse than the one she had suffered by the kitchen window.

Now she could go down and make her tea. She was pouring the boiling water into the pot when there was a tap on the kitchen window. She had been, in a way, almost expecting this, but it made her jump so violently that she spilled the hot water on her hand. Every window is latched, she thought, the front door is chained, the kitchen door bolted. Nobody broke in while I was away; there is nobody in the house but me; before anybody could get in from outside I could be on the telephone to the police. So why am I so scared?

The tap was not repeated. Pulling herself together, she realized what it had been. When she and Hal first saw the kitchen, the window had been almost entirely darkened by an overgrown jasmine bush. Hal had cut it back and it had responded by throwing out long vigorous shoots, one of which had just reached the window.

She was ashamed of herself—for being so frightened of nothing. She put some ointment—kept for just such an emergency—on the scalded hand, placed bread and cheese with the tea on a tray, and carried it into the living room.

She had always been a great reader, but books were no help now because she could not concentrate on them. The television, like the clock in the hall, was silent, because of her need to listen; but she could still knit, and the sweater she was making for Hal was progressing nicely.

Suddenly the phone rang and again she jumped, dropping several stitches.

It was Hal. "Hello, honey."

"Hello, darling."

"How are you?"

"Very well." That was true enough. She was fine, physically. And she must say so, because if Hal had the slightest feeling anything was wrong he'd jump straight into his car and come home. "And you?"

"Busy as I can be. I know everybody says poor old Stubbs died suddenly, but, honestly, by the look of things you'd think no one had been here for a year. There's something else every day. But I'm getting there." He spoke with relish: a born manager. The new job could have been made for him. And nothing must interfere.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Mr. Treadman sent four prospects today. No good. One couple wanted a bungalow. So why did they come? Two of the usual—'What, only a one-car garage!' And the other was one of those women who house-hunt as a hobby. I know the type now. But cheer up, darling. There are some people coming tomorrow. A couple with five children, looking for a large house. Unless the five are all of one sex—which would defy the law of averages—the four bedrooms should be attractive, don't you think?"

"Let's hope so. This is no way to live."

The evening phone call was a delight to them both, but they set

a time limit because of the cost. Hal's new job carried an increase in pay, but their expenses were much greater; they would have to pay for another move, and the hotel in which he was living, although it sounded bleak, was far from cheap.

Perhaps, she thought, replacing the receiver, the shortness of the call was a blessing; she could manage for a short time to pretend that all was well, to sound normal, even lighthearted.

Now that Hal had made his call she could go to bed. She was sleeping badly and took both her book and her knitting with her. She locked the door of the living room; and once inside her bedroom she locked that door too.

In the bathroom she opened a new box of perfumed soap, washed, and then swallowed an aspirin, and, after a moment's consideration, another. What she wanted at this point was a sound night's sleep, a blotting out of consciousness, a respite from fear.

She slept, then woke with a start. She listened, fear rushing back into her. She heard nothing out of the ordinary. Just the wind, blowing under the eaves and making a whining noise; and the old floorboards creaking. The explanations came glibly.

But then there was another sound. A stealthy, intermittent squeak. Somebody must be opening the bathroom window inch by inch.

For a moment she was paralyzed; then adrenaline pumped into her blood. Anyone who was at the bathroom window had either climbed up a pipe or brought a ladder from the shed, and until he was actually across the sill he would be precariously balanced. One strong push . . .

She had never knowingly hurt anything or anybody in her life, but now she rushed to the bathroom fully prepared to push the intruder to certain injury, possible death.

The curtains hung straight and still; behind them the window was securely latched and outside there was nothing but the night. Yet the stealthy noise went on. She whirled around and saw, in the wastepaper basket, the tinted cellophane wrapping from the soap box. She had crumpled it into a ball and now it was releasing itself, creaking with each expansion.

She laughed weakly at her foolishness, then suddenly she leaned on the bowl and was sick.

Back in bed, horribly wakeful, she reviewed the events which had reduced her to this pitiful state.

Like many sinister things it had begun simply. The telephone rang and she answered it, expecting to hear Hal's voice. But it was another voice, male, which asked, "Can I speak to Mr. Baker?" She had replied in the most ordinary way, "No. I'm afraid he isn't here." "Can you tell me when he will be back in town?" "Not for three weeks. I can tell you where to contact him. Just a minute."

Hal had been gone only two days and she had not yet memorized the numbers of either the Wisborough office or his hotel. She consulted the pad on which they were scribbled, and relayed the information. The voice said, "Thank you." An ordinary, routine exchange, the sort of thing any wife did a dozen times in a year.

Then the voice said, in a different way, "I expect you miss him." Nothing peculiar about that, either, except that it hinted at a friendly familiarity from someone who had not given his name. So she said, "Who is it?" There was a little pause and then the voice began to say things so completely obscene that she was dumbstruck; she slammed the receiver down and sat trembling. Can this really have happened to me? Did I hear what I heard? What shall I do?

But she steadied herself. It was not unheard of, it was not even new. There were men, a bit demented, who got their kicks out of making such calls, usually to women listed in telephone directories under their first names. And though she believed and hoped that by slamming down the receiver she had put an end to the incident, a funny doubt remained. Somebody knew that though she was married, she was alone right now and vulnerable.

And who knew that she was alone? All the men at Frane and Company who knew that Hal had gone to Wisborough—about 400 of them; and the three or four who were in Mr. Treadman's real estate agency. Could one of them be so foulmouthed and vile?

Disgust, not fright, had been her emotion then. She also felt some guilt. Such an incident should be reported to the police. But what could they do, except ask questions and make a fuss? And she was afraid that any fuss might, in some round-about way, reach Hal. Forget it, she told herself. It might never happen again.

Two nights later she had been wakened from sleep by the ringing of the telephone extension beside the bed. She switched on the light and reached out sleepily for the receiver.

"It's Western Union," a voice said. "I have a telegram for you."

Hal's firm had some overseas connections. She reached for a pad and pencil and said, "I'm ready, read it, please."

"I think I had better bring it around. It's not something to be read over the phone. I could bring it myself, immediately."

Suspicion began to prick; the time was just after midnight.

"It can wait till morning," she said.

"As you like. But you're a redhead, aren't you?" Before she could drop the receiver her horrified ears heard something of what this crazy person thought red hair implied. It was all absolute filth.

Now she knew that she should report it; the number of suspects narrowed down: someone who knew that Hal was away, someone who knew her by sight. But again she hesitated for fear Hal should find out.

And so the time of terror began. She dared not ignore the telephone at ordinary times. Hal called whenever he could, and he was working odd hours. Mr. Treadman called to make appointments for his clients and to report their decisions, all unfavorable so far. There was one more call in the middle of the night and that she did ignore. The telephone rang and rang; stopped and began again; and although on this occasion she heard nothing, it made her shudder to think that somewhere, probably quite close by, a man waited, ready to pour out terrible filth.

The persecution went on.

The telephone rang at ten in the morning.

"Mrs. Baker? I understand that you have a house for sale."

"That is so."

"Is it convenient for me to come and see it?" She'd never considered this situation. It was impossible to judge anything by the voice; the accent was a local one. But she was cautious, and thank goodness she was, for when she said that the house was in the agent's hands and she could only show it to those with appointments, the man said, "Very wise." And then, "But I'll get you yet! And when I do. . ." She heard just enough to make her feel sick.

And after all, anyone could get an appointment.

She took to peeping through the living-room window, to opening the door only when the chain was on; she lived in a state of perpetual terror.

The day after she had been thrown into panic by a piece of celophane was Friday. The family man and his wife came and went;

at twelve o'clock the phone rang. Was it Mr. Treadman with the report on the large family?

The voice said, "I'm watching you. I always win. The longer the wait the longer the . . ."

She slammed it down, and when at about five o'clock the telephone rang again she was of two minds about answering it. It was early—on Friday—for Hal. But it could be Mr. Treadman.

It was Hal.

"Honey, listen, I'll be home this evening. I had to look into something at Wolverton and I thought to myself—hey, that's almost halfway home. And what's the point in being a big man if you can't take a weekend off? I don't know exactly when I'll be there; with any luck it will be between six and seven."

She said, "Darling, how marvelous!" Relief and joy flooded her and then a sternly practical thought popped into her head. There was nothing to eat—at least nothing from a masculine point of view—in the house.

"Hal, could you—I'm sorry to be a nuisance—but is there a store close to where you are? Anywhere you could pick up a steak for supper?"

"Almost next door. Don't worry. This prodigal son will bring his own fatted calf. I must go. Be seeing you."

Happy, restored, and confident, she sped about preparing vegetables, making his favorite dessert. Then she went around the house removing any sign of terror; she was about to replace the weights in the grandfather clock when she heard his key in the front door, and the check of the chain.

She ran to let him in and greeted him with an exuberance that reminded him of a puppy he had once owned. He hugged her hard and then said, "Honey, you've gotten thin. You haven't been eating properly."

"Oh, yes, I have. Huge meals every day. It must be the exercise. Upstairs, downstairs, all around the house. This way to the garage, ladies and gentlemen. Any more for the garden? Three or four times a day. It's guaranteed to work off the fat." She sounded gay, but she looked haggard.

"Any luck with the fellow with all the children?"

"I'm afraid not. All seven of them couldn't eat in the kitchen, and with the dining room in constant use the wife wanted someplace where she could run a serving cart between the stove and the table. I saw her point."

Hal saw it too, though he didn't say anything. It was an awkward, inconvenient house and no amount of prettifying could hide its basic faults. If it hadn't been for all her enthusiasm he would never have given it a second thought.

"Do we have time for a homecoming drink?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll just put this food away. Be right with you."

He dropped his bag near the foot of the stairs, looked at the clock and said, "Hey, what's this? Grandfather stopped?"

"Yes. Or gone mad. It struck about fifty times. But don't worry about that now." She almost dragged him into the living room. There he went to the corner cupboard which held their small supply of liquor.

No Scotch.

"I'm t—terribly sorry d—darling. I had an accident."

And that accounted for the bandage on her hand which he had noted—his eyes missed little—but had not yet had time to mention. He noted also the stammer; she had told him that as a child she had stammered but had outgrown it when she left school.

"We can make do with sherry tonight." He poured two drinks, sat down, and looked about with satisfaction. "It's lovely to be home. Happy weekend, darling."

Her book was lying on the sofa. He never read anything but technical books himself but he liked to show interest.

"Still reading about Marie Antoinette?"

"It's not a b—book to read quickly."

His eyes moved to the TV set. They had been avidly following a serial. He had now missed two installments.

"Have they found that sunken treasure yet?"

"I d—d—don't know. It all became such a m—mess. I couldn't be b—bothered."

She then said, not stammering at all, that he must be famished, so she'd better start preparing the beautiful steak he had brought. And after that they had one of their normal happy evenings until, not wishing to clutter up the master bedroom, he went to put his bag into his own dressing room, and found the door locked.

"M—Monday n—night," she said. "It was windy. That door r—rattled. So I locked it."

That night she slept well. And she was lucky about the clock. On her way to make the morning tea she put the weights back; she'd stopped it at a few minutes before seven, so now it went faithfully on.

And all Saturday was blissful. Hal cut the lawn and at her request repruned the jasmine bush. Sunday began well too, but as the day advanced the imminent parting cast its shadow. And Hal was the first to acknowledge it.

"Look here, honey. You have tried. Give it up. Put a few things together and come back with me. We could leave a note and the keys with Mr. Treadman. After all, he sold the house to us and if we give him enough time he'll find somebody else to buy it."

The temptation was almost irresistible.

"Oh, Hal, you know what it looked like when we first saw it. Our only hope of getting back what we paid, regardless of what we spent on it, is to have it looking nice and inhabited and for me to be here, pointing out its best features. It has only been two weeks. . . you must give me time. Say a month." Two more weeks of living under constant threat.

"But by that time the house I have my eye on in Wisborough will be sold, honey. I can't buy it until you've seen it, can I? And it'll sell in no time."

She felt an unreasonable envy of people who owned so salable a property, and the envy burst out in sharpness. Stammering badly, she demanded to know how he could even *consider* buying another house, with this one still unsold? Did he want *two* mortgages to worry about? She repeated, defiantly, her intention of remaining in the house, keeping it looking like a home, until it was sold.

Her tone astonished him: they had had differences of opinion often enough but she had never sounded so much like a nag. He answered her soothingly, and promised not to mention it again, and then made her promise to eat properly.

Now he stood in the hall, ready to go. He was taking back his overcoat and it hung on his arm; his right hand grasped his suitcase; his left clutched two of his books. Any normal wife would offer to carry something, go with him to the garage, and close the doors after him. But she dared not leave the door unlocked, even for a minute, and if she locked it Hal would guess. She eyed the shrubbery of lilac and laurel and thought—perhaps even now. . .

There was no need to simulate a shiver. "I think I won't c—come out. It's t—turned a bit ch—chilly."

He had not taken more than three steps before he heard her lock and chain the door.

On Monday Mr. Treadman rang early. He sounded hopeful. The couple for whom he was making an appointment at eleven o'clock were elderly and not looking for a modern house.

She rushed about. There were no more flowers in the garden, but her dried hydrangea heads and red berries looked well in the hall, and on the dining-room table she put a bowl of wax fruit under a glass dome, a real antique which she found at the back of a junk shop and bought for almost nothing.

It all looks so nice, she said to herself. Let them like it. Let them buy it.

Just before eleven the telephone rang again. Mr. Treadman, she thought, canceling the appointment.

"Nice weekend?" the sadistic voice asked. "I saw you shopping with hubby! What else did you. . ." She cut off the rest of it and stood trembling.

Before she could recover, the couple arrived, but she was so upset and stammering so wildly that she had difficulty in pointing out the good features of the house.

(Back in their car the wife said, "Oh, dear! It looked so suitable. But I do believe that people leave their mark on houses and I don't want to take over from somebody so obviously neurotic.")

"I think," the husband said, "that she was hiding something and was afraid we'd spot it. Bad drains, most likely." They agreed that it was a pity.)

The telephone rang at three o'clock; she forced herself to answer it. It was Mr. Treadman, sounding jubilant. He had sold the house; he hoped she was pleased.

She had now had time to recall an old trick, learned in a stammering childhood: when a word gave difficulty you abandoned it and tried another, an easier one.

"I am very p—delighted. Who b—is it?"

"A client from another city. We circulate descriptions of our properties widely, you know. It exactly fits his requirements and he is willing to pay the full price."

"But without s—s—looking at it?"

She could hardly believe their luck; it was incredible that anyone would buy a house in such a casual way.

"I gather that my client was familiar with the house in the past. And he is slightly known to me. You don't have to worry. It is a firm offer."

"Oh, th—the—I'm very grateful," she said.

She broke her own strict rule about not telephoning Hal during office hours. She sensed that she had disturbed him and that his full attention was elsewhere. When she stammered out the wonderful news he said, "Oh, good. Now listen, there's a train at four thirty; it gets in at seven. I'll meet you." She could not refrain from sharing the joke with him—a joke against herself.

"The f—f—comic thing is, here I was, trying so hard to keep it looking n—livable, and now it's s—bought by somebody who didn't even inspect it."

She began to laugh and there was a quality in her laughter that was disturbing. Hal visualized her falling down the awkward stairs with a heavy suitcase, or rushing for the bus and being knocked down.

"Listen," he said, "bring a small bag, just what you need for a few days. And get a taxi to take you to the station. I'll see you soon."

In the living room she stood still for a moment, indecisive. She was safe; tonight she would sleep soundly in Wisborough, beside Hal. But there were other women, as alone and vulnerable as she had been. The caller would find himself another victim.

She dialed the police, gave her name and address, and said that she wished to report some persistent and very unpleasant telephone calls. She was asked to hold on, and she assembled any scraps of information likely to be helpful—the voice young, the accent local; somebody who knew of Hal's movements; somebody who knew her by sight and had, possibly, an obsession with red hair. Not much to go on.

Wait! Judging from the close watch kept on her, somebody living in this neighborhood, and somebody who knew that telegrams from Western Union could arrive here in the middle of the night.

Her help was not needed. A slightly reproving voice informed her that there had been other complaints; some ladies had reported and collaborated fully, action had been taken, and a youth had been caught in the act during the lunch hour.

"It is unlikely that you will be troubled again, madam. If you should be, please contact us *immediately*."

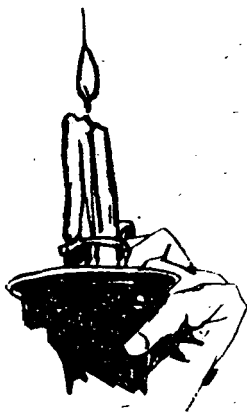
The rebuke was well deserved and she accepted it meekly. When she thought of the irony of it all—so much endured for no purpose—she felt inclined to laugh again; but she had heard the

note of impending hysteria in her voice as she talked to Hal. She could not allow herself to give way now.

In Wisborough, Hal worked on steadily until it was time to meet the train. She had once said, not insultingly—indeed, quite fondly—that he had a mind like the computer with which he dealt.

It was true. Feed in the evidence, facts, not fancies, ask the question, and out came an answer as nearly accurate as was possible in a world now known to be a bit lopsided, moving in an orbit which made leap years necessary. His mind had taken in the irrefutable evidence and it had produced a feasible solution.

Ahead of him, he knew, lay subterfuges, maybe downright lies, and certainly the financial juggling required of a man who had just "bought" his own house in Ashforth and intended tomorrow to buy one in Wisborough. The computer was willing to oblige with a set of dismal figures. But he had a cheerful and steady nature and the prospect did not dismay him. After all, as he had often said, it was only money.



William Bankier

Policeman's Lot

The thought that "a policeman's lot is not a happy one" has become a cliché. But there's one thing to remember about clichés—too often they're true, especially in these times . . .

When Danny Peterson swung the iron bar, the store window shattered with a noise that struck Danny's ears like a scream. But he was prepared for it. Poor Ginko, watching the deserted street for cops, was taken by surprise and jumped—straight up off the ground with both feet in the air, like a character in a cartoon. Danny started to laugh and Ginko soon caught the hysteria, so they were giggling and clutching each other while the alarm bell clamored steadily.

They were still laughing in spasms as they reached in carefully past the shards of broken glass and lifted out expensive transistor radios, tape decks, and cassette players. Ginko held the flight bag open while Danny stacked the units gently, not wanting to damage them.

And it was Ginko who heard the approaching footsteps first—a heavy tread in the adjoining alley, getting closer.

"Let's split," Ginko whispered, closing the bag.

Danny grabbed another radio in each hand and followed his friend to the corner, running quickly and silently. Here he paused and looked back to see a familiar shape appear out of the alley and stop in front of the broken window.

Sergeant Russell Cobb was breathing so hard he thought he would be sick. His heart was pounding and sweat dripped from his forehead into his eyes. The collar of his blue shirt gripped his throbbing neck like a vise and he tore away the top button, so he could get air. His five-foot ten-inch frame was lugging 260 pounds and he knew he had no strength left.

At the far corner Danny Peterson whispered after his friend who was beetling off through a parking lot. "It's all right, Gink. It's only the Pig."

Lieutenant Oberon was glad of an excuse to end his interview with Sergeant Cobb. He was always uncomfortable talking to him. For one thing, Cobb was well in his forties while Oberon was only 29. He had an uneasy feeling the older man should be commanding him. Anyway, how could you reprimand a man who never said anything in his own defense?

The Sergeant just sat there like a big house with all the lights turned out. But Cobb was wrong, dammit, he was wrong. Any other officer happening on the scene of the break-in as soon as Cobb had would have made an arrest. Cobb did not even give chase.

So the subject of his weight came up again and of course Cobb said nothing. It was at this point that Asti came in with coffee and Oberon used the interruption as an excuse to send Cobb away.

When Cobb was gone, Asti, a very old Desk Sergeant, said, "Why do we keep him, Ted? He's been out from the city three months and he's done nothing."

"You don't know the story."

"All I know is the kids laugh at him. He's worse than useless." Sergeant Asti had begun taking his morning coffee in Oberon's office a year ago. The young Lieutenant didn't seem to mind. "In fact," Asti added, "he's an embarrassment."

"That's why he's here. He embarrassed them in the city, so they sent him to us."

"Why didn't they just bust him?"

Oberon sipped Asti's very good coffee and took a bite of the chocolate biscuit the Sergeant had propped against the saucer. "Russell Cobb was a Detective Sergeant in the toughest precinct in the city. He was one of the best."

"I don't believe it."

"It's true. He wasn't always like he is now. He had a great record. But one morning a few years back he put his two kids, a son and a daughter, in the car and drove them to an apartment house where some of their friends lived. He left them there to play while they waited for a school bus. He was about six blocks away when he heard an explosion. He drove back and the apartment house was gone."

"I remember that," Asti said. "Natural-gas explosion. Killed about fifty people."

"Including Cobb's son and daughter." Oberon set down the empty cup. "That was the end of his life. His wife drifted away

and stayed drunk in bars most of the time. I think she blamed Cobb for taking the kids to the apartment house. And Russ started to turn into what you saw this morning. They took him off detective work because he lost all his drive. And when he got so fat they couldn't stand having him downtown, they sent him out here. It was that or bust him." Oberon looked at Asti. "But how can you bust a good man after he's taken a shot like that?"

Asti got up and gathered up the cups. "Well, one thing sure. He better lose about a hundred pounds or he's going to kill himself."

Oberon said, "I think that's what he's trying to do."

Danny Peterson sat on the park bench with his arm around Sandra Vijuk. Ginko was lying on the grass with an old fedora hat over his eyes and a brand-new cigar in his mouth, unlighted.

Danny had on the football sweater he'd worn last year during the most successful season his high school ever had. As quarterback of the undefeated team, he had been approached by several college scouts with offers of athletic scholarships. Danny had turned them all down. This had angered his father, had given his mother something new to cry about, and had caused Sandra to say for the twentieth time, "I can't figure you out, Danny."

Good marks had always come easily to Danny Peterson. Praise was always being heaped on his head by admiring adults—except at home where his father got drunk and beat him and his mother hung back with her crumpled face and worried about him. Maybe that was why he turned down the scholarships, because he knew his parents wanted him to take one. He'd have to figure out that whole scene one day.

Right now he was trying to figure out how to handle Luftspring. The man was due any minute. Luftspring must want him, but how much would he pay? Danny didn't want to price himself too low.

"Why are we sitting here?" Sandra said. "Come home with me and I'll make us some lunch."

"Later, kid. Later."

Sandra drew Danny's extended arm around her neck and bit him gently on the wrist. She was always trying to get him to come home with her but he never would. He had no interest in meeting her parents. In fact, he had nothing to do with any adults she knew of. Maybe he was afraid if he met her folks she'd expect to meet his. And she knew how he felt about his father.

They were still sitting there when a short silver-haired man in a black suit walked by and sat on a bench about fifty feet away. Danny soon got up, said, "Hang in here, kid," and walked over to sit beside the man.

From his position Ginko watched it happen, his hat tipped back, one eye squinting down the cigar.

"What's he doing, Gink?" Sandra asked.

"He's making arrangements."

"What arrangements?"

"To get rich."

And that's how it seemed to Danny Peterson because Luftspring was in an agreeable mood. He accepted Danny's demand for ten percent with no dickering. The drugs would be supplied for Danny to push to his wide circle of friends, good stuff he could rely on with no chance of a bad trip and unsatisfied customers. The deal was closed and Danny was getting ready to rejoin his friends when Sergeant Russell Cobb drifted out of the park and came up behind their bench.

He said, "I thought it was you, Luftspring. Spreading your operations out to the suburbs?"

Luftspring's eyes glittered. "Cobb, I hardly recognized you. You sure have changed since the city." He glanced at Cobb's shirt, the blue material gaping between the buttons to show a flash of white underwear. "There's nothing sadder than a busted cop."

"We call him the Pig," Danny said. "All cops are pigs, but this guy really looks like one."

Cobb turned to the boy. "Son, I could swear I saw you thé other night. Down the street from a store with a broken window."

"Your eyes are as out of shape as the rest of you."

The policeman glanced at the pretty girl who had approached and was standing a few feet away. He said to Danny, "Don't get involved with Luftspring, son. He's poison. You work for him and you're finished."

"All we're having is a private conversation," Luftspring said. "I saw the kid play football. I'm a fan of his."

Cobb looked at him for a moment, his stomach rising and falling, the breath wheezing in his throat. "Think of what I said, Danny." And Cobb walked away.

Cobb went from the park to his room, three blocks away, upstairs on a side street. He was off duty until seven o'clock. Most

afternoons like this he poured himself a drink and sat in front of the TV, watching soap operas or an old movie or a ball game. After half an hour his head would sag and he would fall asleep in the chair.

Today the doorbell buzzed soon after he came in. He opened the door and saw the girl who had been standing in the park.

"Can I talk to you? Please?" She hung her head and looked up at him through a cloud of chestnut hair. About 16. He asked her in and she sat at the kitchen table.

It was a very ordinary plea. Cobb had heard many like it. She was worried about Danny. She knew he had done some holdups and break-ins, but now he was starting to mess with this bad guy from the city. Luftspring? Yes, the man on the bench. She had tried to reason with Danny but he wouldn't listen to her. Could Cobb do anything?

"I have no evidence to arrest the boy."

"I don't mean that. I mean could you talk to him. Try to straighten him out."

"Do you think he'd listen to me?"

She looked as though she might cry. "I heard the terrible things he said about you. But that's part of his problem. He's very mad all the time. He's always smiling but underneath he's mad. Not at you. At everybody. At everything."

Cobb didn't know what to do with a sixteen-year-old girl in his kitchen who seemed about to cry. He got her a glass of milk and a plate of peanutbutter cookies. She went on talking and after a while he got another glass of milk and a plate and helped himself to the cookies.

The talk was ordinary stuff, about the neighborhood and the boys she liked and the girls she was having arguments with. It was very comfortable and quite a lot of time went by. Cobb ended up promising to see if he could reason with Danny.

On the way out Sandra stopped and looked at a photograph on the wall in the living room. There were four people in it—a slim young man in gray slacks and a blazer, a pretty woman in a white dress, and two children, a boy and a girl, all holding hands and squinting into the sun. They were posed against a stucco wall with a row of hollyhocks bowing behind them.

"Is this your family?"

Cobb said, "It was but they died." He couldn't begin to sort out the confusion in that statement. Besides, the pretty woman in the

white dress might as well be dead. "That's Norman—the boy—and that's Connie. She'd be your age now."

Several days went by. Sergeant Cobb's back began to hurt him as it had done in the past. He put a board under the mattress and began shaving with one foot raised on the edge of the bathtub, to lock the vertebrae. Nothing helped, and he ignored the exercises the therapist had taught him last time.

He missed two days of patrols and spent the time in bed with the blinds down, losing track of day and night. When he reappeared on duty, his pace was even slower than usual and his huge face sagged with fatigue and pain. The kids in the park said, "The Pig is really a pig today." At the precinct Lieutenant Oberon made up his mind to have Cobb in and lay it on the line. One of these days.

Cobb found Danny Peterson in a back booth at Carlo's Restaurant. As he approached, a pale-faced scrawny teen-ager slipped out of the booth and edged past him, one hand thrust deep in his pocket. Cobb forced his way onto the bench across from Danny and caught a glimpse of the bills Danny put into his pocket.

"Mind if we talk?"

"Not at all, Pig." Danny pushed his plate of French fries across the table. "Here. Eat. You look like you're wasting away."

"You realize I could grab that kid who just left you, spend five minutes with him, and you'd be in big trouble."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because Luftspring would just get himself another boy. I'd rather get him." Cobb reached over and took Danny's fork. He began eating the French fries.

"How about getting me?" Danny asked.

"I don't know about you. Really. I can't figure you out."

"Try," Danny said. "I'm interested."

"Well, it's as if you're playing some kind of silly game. You don't really mean it. I can spot all kinds of brains in you, all kinds of potential. You've got looks, energy, popularity."

Danny laughed. "Kiss me quick," he said.

"Sure. It's all a joke. It's like you feel you can get twenty points behind and still pass for three touchdowns in the last quarter and win. But you've overlooked something."

"What's that?"

"You could get your arm or leg broken. Not even finish the game."

Cobb wasn't sure he was getting through to the boy. He finished the French fries and started to rise. Danny looked at the empty plate and there was a strange soft expression on his face.

"Stick around," he said. "I'll buy you a piece of pie."

Cobb was undecided. Then he made up his mind. He stayed and had the pie.

Lieutenant Oberon was glad of something to discuss with Cobb other than his deteriorating appearance. The report from Sergeant Asti who had seen Cobb and Peterson together was encouraging. Maybe some of the old detective sense remained.

"I like the way you're getting close to that kid. I'm sure he's a pusher. When can you make an arrest?"

"That isn't my plan."

"What is?"

"I want to change him. Straighten him out."

"Hell, don't try to straighten him out! Bust him." Oberon was so mad he wasn't thinking straight. "He's not your son, Cobb."

The two men sat in silence after that. Then Cobb got up and left.

Sandra Vijuk's feelings were mixed as she sat in the big convertible and waited for Danny to complete his phone call. His alliance with Luftspring still worried her. And as far as she knew, the big policeman's several conversations with Danny over the past few weeks had been ineffective. But the car looked good on her, she knew that. And here they were, heading up to the lake on a summer evening—she had dreamed of that kind of freedom.

The phone call in the isolated highway booth, which had begun casually, seemed to be taking a bad turn. She could hear Danny's voice raised in irritation.

"Listen, I've had a lot of expenses. You'll get your money. Big deal, so I'm a couple of payments behind." Danny listened, his face red, his big hand working on the door handle. "Go to hell, Luftspring. You don't scare me. One word from me to the cops and you're finished. You just try me. Cobb is very interested in you and I could tell him plenty."

He banged down the phone and crunched across the gravel shoulder. He was in the car and had the motor racing before he said, "They need me more than I need them." Then the big car gunned away.

They were both very tired when Danny parked the car in the market square at midnight. Their skin was sunburnt, their muscles aching from swimming. Sandra carried both damp bathing suits in a rolled towel as they strolled toward Carlo's at the end of the street.

The voice from the alleyway came as a shock. "Just a word, Danny."

They both saw Luftspring at the same instant. Sandra tried to pull Danny away, but he saw the gun leveled at his stomach. "Get away, Sandy," he said. "I can handle this."

She ran and Danny stepped into the alley. Luftspring backed away a few paces.

"Stay right there," Luftspring warned.

"What is this?"

"You said bad things to me on the phone today. I don't like being threatened by a crazy kid."

"I didn't mean to threaten you. I just can't pay you your money right now. But I will. Meanwhile just don't bug me."

"No, Danny. Don't you bug me. I have too much at stake here. Don't tell me you're going to bring in the cops. That makes me mad."

The little gray-haired man in the black suit began to look very offensive to Danny. A thought flashed through Danny's mind. What am I doing here? He said, "Listen, I've decided to give this up. I won't rat on you. I just want out."

"Oh, no. We can still use you. It's a lot of trouble breaking in a new pusher."

"You'll have to. I'm finished."

Luftspring tensed. He had heard the footsteps first. Now Danny heard them. Running. And there was Sandra followed by a panting, sweating Sergeant Russell Cobb. He was wearing a flannel dressing gown and slippers which made him seem even more vulnerable against Luftspring's gun.

Cobb stepped in front of the boy.

"Stay behind me," he said.

Luftspring's face got red. "Get lost, Cobb. This is strictly between me and the kid."

"He's right. Get out of here," Danny said.

Cobb's voice was harsh. "Don't move, Danny."

He walked slowly toward Luftspring who said, "I'm not fooling, Cobb. Keep back."

The panic in his voice made the first shot inevitable. It struck Cobb in the chest. He paused, then moved ahead. Three more bullets pounded into Cobb's massive body before he reached Luftspring who stood now, hypnotized, as though suddenly confronted by an elephant. Cobb took the man's gun arm, twisted it until it snapped. Luftspring screamed and the gun clattered to the pavement.

Danny ran and picked up the gun just as Cobb sank to his knees, then slowly rolled onto his side.

A uniformed cop came running into the alley, his revolver drawn. Danny handed him Luftspring's gun and joined Sandra who was kneeling beside the huge bulk of Cobb's body.

His eyes were open. He spoke to Sandra. "Connie," he whispered, "make your brother be good."

"What?" Danny said.

Sandra jabbed Danny with her elbow. "Yes," she said to Cobb, "I will. Don't worry, I will." She put her hand on his forehead.

He smiled and closed his eyes.

Sneakered feet pounded on the pavement and Ginko was suddenly there, having run all the way from Carlo's. He had a can of beer in his hand, which was against the law. He leaned over Danny and Sandra to get a good look.

"Hey," he said, "they shot the Pig. The Pig is dead."



Edmund Crispin

The Pencil

Here is a short-short that is one of Edmund Crispin's finest efforts in this difficult length—about a hired murderer, a real professional, hard, cold, impassive, whose instructions were simple and clear: "That's your job—to kill" . . .

It was not until the third night that they came for Eliot. He had expected them sooner, and in his cold withdrawn fashion had resented and grown impatient at the delay—for although his tastes had never been luxurious, the squalid bedroom which he had rented in the Clerkenwell boardinghouse irked him. Now, listening impassively to the creak of their furtive steps on the staircase, he glanced at his gun-metal wristwatch and made certain necessary adjustments in the hidden thing that he carried on him. Then quite deliberately he turned his chair so that his back was toward the door.

His belated dive for his revolver, after they had crept up behind him, was convincing enough to draw a gasp from one of them before they pinioned his arms, thrusting a gun muzzle inexpertly at the back of his neck. Petty crooks, thought Eliot contemptuously as he feigned a struggle. And "petty crooks" again, as they searched him and hustled him down to the waiting car. Yet his scorn was not vainglorious. The hard knot into which his career of professional killing had twisted his emotions left no room even for that. Only once had Eliot killed on his own account—and that was when they had nearly caught him. He was not proposing to repeat the mistake.

It was a little after midnight and the narrow street was deserted. The big car moved off smoothly and quietly. Presently it stopped by an overgrown bomb site, blanched under the moon, and the blinds were drawn down. There they gagged Eliot, and blindfolded him, and tied his hands behind his back. When they found him submissive, their confidence perceptibly grew. Between them and Addison's lot, Eliot reflected as the car moved off again,

there was little or nothing to choose: petty crooks all of them, petty warehouse thieves whose spheres of operation had happened to collide. That was why he was here.

He made no attempt to chart mentally the car's progress. He had not been asked to do that—and it was Eliot's great merit as a hired murderer that he was incurious, never going beyond the letter of his commission. Leaning back against the cushions, he reconsidered his instructions as the car purred on through London, through the night.

"Holden's people are getting to be a nuisance," Addison had said—Addison the young boss with his swank and his oiled hair and his Hollywood mannerisms. "But if Holden dies they'll fall to pieces. That's your job—to kill Holden."

Eliot had only nodded. Explanations bored him.

"But the trouble is," Addison had continued, "that we can't find Holden. We don't know where his hideout is. That means we've got to fix things so that they lead us to it themselves. My idea is to make you the bait." He had grinned. "Poisoned bait."

With that he had gone on to explain how Eliot was to be represented as a new and shaky recruit to the Addison mob; how it was to be made to seem that Eliot possessed information which Holden would do much to get. Eliot had listened to what concerned him directly and ignored the rest. It was thorough, certainly. They ought to fall for it.

And to judge from his present situation, they had . . .

It seemed a long drive. The only thing above all others that Holden's men wanted to avoid was the possibility of being followed, the possibility that he, Eliot, might pick up some clue to the hideout's whereabouts. So whatever route they were taking, it certainly wasn't the most direct.

At last they arrived. Eliot was pushed upstairs and through a door, was thrust roughly onto a bed. A bed, he thought: good. That meant Holden had only this one musty-smelling room. All the more chance, therefore, that the job would come off.

He let them hit him a few times before he talked: his boyhood had inured him to physical pain, and he was being well paid. Then he told them what they wanted to know—the story Addison had given him, the story with just enough truth in it to be convincing. Eliot enjoyed the acting: he was good at it. And they were at a disadvantage, of course, in that having left the blindfold on they were unable to watch his eyes.

In any case, Holden—who to judge from his voice was a nervous elderly Cockney—seemed satisfied. And Holden was the only one of them who mattered . . . Before long, Eliot knew, the police would get Holden, and Addison too, and their small-time wrangling for the best cribs would be done with for good and all. That, however, was of no consequence to Eliot. All he had to do was to say his lesson nicely and leave his visiting card and collect his fee.

And here it was at last: the expected, the inevitable offer. Yes, all right, Eliot said smoothly after a few moments of apparent hesitation; he didn't mind being their stool pigeon so long as they paid him enough. And they were swallowing that, too, telling him what they wanted him to find out about Addison's plans, sticking a cigarette between his bruised lips and lighting it for him. He almost laughed. They weren't taking off the blindfold, though: they didn't trust him enough for that. They were going to let him go, but in case he decided not to play ball with them, after all, they weren't risking his carrying away any important information . . .

Yes, they were going to let him go. This is it, Eliot thought. And delicately, as he lay sprawled on the bed, his fingers moved under the hem of his jacket, so that, hidden from his interrogators, something slim and smooth rolled out onto the bedclothes.

Fractionally he shifted his position, thrusting the object—to the limit that the rope round his wrists would allow—underneath the pillow. It was a nice little thing, and Eliot was sorry to lose it: in appearance, nothing more than an ordinary mechanical pencil, but with a time fuse inside it and a powerful explosive charge. Addison had told him that it was one of the many innocent-looking objects supplied to French saboteurs during the Occupation, to be deposited on the desks of German military commanders or in other such strategic places. And Eliot, who cared nothing for war but who was interested in any destructive weapon, had appreciated its potentialities. As a means of murder it was chancy, of course: this one might kill Holden, or on the other hand it might kill a cleaning woman making up the bed.

But that was none of Eliot's business. He was doing what he had been told to do, and whether it succeeded or not he was going to collect.

The return drive was like the first. At the bomb site the gag

and bonds and blindfold were taken off, and presently Eliot was back at his lodginghouse door, in the gray light of early dawn, watching Holden's car drive rapidly away.

He mounted to his room, examined his damaged face without resentment in the mirror, and on impulse started to pack. Then, tiring suddenly, he lay down on the bed and slept.

The pencil had been set to explode at eight. . .

It was a quarter to eight when Eliot woke, and the full light had come. Finish packing first, he thought; then see Addison, report, and get paid off. The early editions of the evening papers would tell him, before he caught the boat train, whether Holden was dead or not. . .

So he was shifting the pillows, to make more room on the bed for his shabby suitcase, just as the clock of St. John's struck the hour.

And that was when he saw the pencil.

For a second he stared at it in simple incomprehension. Then understanding came. Of course, thought Eliot dully, of course! They weren't risking the secret of their precious hideout. This is where they brought me to, after driving me round and round the streets. This is where they questioned me—here in my own room!

Panic flooded him. He ran. From the bedside to the door was a distance of no more than three paces.

But the explosion had caught and killed him before his fingers even touched the doorknob.



Robert Twohy

V e n g e a n c e

After too long an absence from EQ Anthologies, Robert Twohy returns with a prison story—a tale of the grim, relentless struggle between two men, jailer and jailed, each determined to have his way . . .

Sergeant Eglanti stood outside Castell's cell. Castell, lying on his mat, could see Eglanti's smooth pale face, sliced by the bars of the grill in the padded door.

"Of the twenty prisoners here you are the dirtiest."

Castell lay there, with only his pants on, his sunbaked torso caked with dirt from the river. His face, between the hair and the tangled beard, was a gray wedge in which blue eyes stared steadily at Eglanti's bar-sliced face.

He heard the rattle of keys and the click of the lock. The padded door swung open. Eglanti came in, pushing the door behind him, and turned momentarily to lock it.

It was eight o'clock. Castell had had his supper. The tin plate full of an unidentifiable mess had been slid through the grille which could be raised from the outside; a tin cup had contained a greasy fluid that was called coffee. After supper Castell had dozed, half dreaming of Eglanti.

Now Eglanti was here. Castell lay still, dirty hands on his chest, only his eyes alive as Eglanti stared down at him.

"And your cell is the filthiest. You have no pride, Castell. Your spirit is broken."

"No," said Castell, looking back at him.

"Then why can't you at least wash off at the end of the day?"

Castell did not reply. Eglanti loomed over him in his khaki clothes. Across his chest was a gleaming black belt. On his hip was a holster held by a clip which Eglanti had to press with a thumb to release the gun. On Eglanti's shoulders were the straps of a sergeant, straps Castell had worn a year before. At that time Eglanti had been Castell's corporal.

"Well," said Eglanti, "it's obvious. In the last few weeks you've gotten old and despairing. You're an old animal, waiting to die."

Eglanti, gazing down at him with his small bright brown eyes, smiled. The corners of his soft brown mustache lifted, exposing a gleam of snowy teeth.

Castell said, in his rusty voice, "I'll live long enough."

"For what?"

"Vengeance."

Eglanti laughed. "Here you lie, a skeleton. You were fat, Castell, when you came to this cell. Now you're just skin and bones. You barely have the strength to drag through the day. And here you lie, with not even the strength to move. Would you attack me, pluck my gun from the holster?" The soft laugh again.

"But I don't underestimate you," Eglanti went on. "I don't underestimate your hatred for me. I know that every possible scheme has gone through your mind. That is why you—all the prisoners but especially you—are constantly searched. As you come back from the river at the end of the day—to be sure you haven't concealed a rock or a sharp stick in your pants. And your cell is searched—under your mat, inside it. And the hole, even that's checked."

Eglanti gestured to the hole in the dirty stone floor that was Castell's latrine. The jailer smiled—one lid came down in a kind of wink. "Eternal vigilance, Castell—that's the price a good jailer must pay . . . You notice I always lock your cell door behind me? The enemy isn't always just inside the cell."

"Something," said Castell, "that I overlooked."

"Yes. And now you pay the price."

Eglanti turned to the door. "Lie in your filth and dream of vengeance. Draw hope from the dream. But Saturday, which is three days from now, important visitors from the capital are coming. They will look over the prison. A day off for all the prisoners! Saturday you will dress in clean shirt and pants, clean socks—yours in the corner are abominably dirty, as always.

"Saturday morning you will be marched to the river and your clothes will be washed spotless. And your body, too—for the first time in weeks. And the cell here—you will be given a broom, a scrub rag . . . and in the end, you will present a radiant picture. That's why I stopped in tonight—to give you that word. And also to tell you: when the boat bringing the visitors leaves I will be aboard."

Castell felt dismay. "You're being transferred?"

"No. A leave. I am going back to be married."

"Congratulations." Castell's voice was dry.

"Thank you. But as you know, my fiancée's father is a Sergeant-Major. I have every hope that during my leave he will use his considerable influence to arrange my transfer to his company. In which case I will not be returning here."

A mock bow. "If you seriously plan vengeance it had better be before I go." He turned, still smiling, and went out.

Castell lay in the dark. At night the prison was stifling; damp rose through the ground, through the floor, through the thin mat, so that one gasped for air, and at the same time shivered. A small barred window in the wall gave a glimpse of the brooding night sky. Below it was the jungle, and the river, in which he and others, in chains, toiled daily, building with heavy stones and timbers the dam that would never be completed—that had been the project for years, the full 16 years that Castell had been in charge of the prison; that had been, in fact, Castell's invention.

The purpose of the dam was to work the prisoners, all of whom were political, to exhaustion and early death. The splendor of the concept, as devised by Castell, was that, as the dam began to close off the river, the water inevitably rose over its banks, washing out the anchoring section of the dam and ultimately sending the whole construction down the current. So then it had to be started all over again. One supervised the laying of the anchoring section with this object in mind.

Three years before, Eglanti had arrived at the prison colony and had become Castell's assistant on the dam. The corporal had learned well. The past year, since he had taken charge, the dam had collapsed precisely when it should have, no less than three times.

Castell lay sweating and shivering under his sparse blanket and thought not of the dam or the river or the jungle, but of Eglanti, who in a few days would be leaving—and wondered if his plan of vengeance would work. If not, Castell would die, unsatisfied.

He would die in any case. That was certain. His sentence was eight years. Only a year of it had passed, and already the toil, the heat, the cold, the starvation diet had taken their toll. There was no possibility he would live even another year. A few more

months at most; he knew death was inside him now, eating away at his vitals. Which was all right—who wanted to live on as a prisoner here?

But first he had to pay Eglanti. To do to Eglanti what Eglanti had done to him. Eglanti could not leave before what Castell had dreamed of so often should take place.

He must prove to Eglanti, that master schemer, that he, Castell, was still the Sergeant, still the superior—that Castell could plan and carry out Eglanti's downfall in just such a masterful way as Eglanti had planned and carried out his.

Then death would be welcome.

A year before, in this same six-by-six cell, its walls padded with mattresses screwed into the stone, had resided one Da Pinta, a thin gray creature, a pamphleteer or anarchist or some such, condemned for his activities to ten years of servitude. He was of no interest to Sergeant Castell at the time—just one of 20-odd scarecrows toiling in their chains in the mud of the river, or gasping and shivering in the cells.

Castell had paid Da Pinta routine visits, as he did to all of them, primarily to search the cells for possible weapons, or to shout at them, or bully them, if that was his fancy. The guards here did not physically abuse the prisoners: the river was for that. Castell's decree, carried on by Eglanti, was that you did not hurry a man's death by beating him or causing him injury; his sentence was for such-and-such a time, and the poor devil must serve as much of it as his constitution would stand.

On the night of his downfall Castell, fat and sleek in his spotless uniform, paid just such a routine visit. It happened to be a time when two of the guards were in the prison kitchen, having their dinner; two soon to go on duty were still sleeping; and Corporal Eglanti was in the front office, working on some forms.

Castell had a vivid memory of gazing down at Da Pinta, just as Eglanti had so recently gazed down at him, barking out a command to stand, to turn over his mat—and that was his last memory of the scene.

He awoke with a splitting headache and realized he was lying on the floor of the cell. The cell door was open and Da Pinta was gone.

Staggering to the door, shouting hoarsely, Castell had grasped for his pistol and found it was also gone.

The office was empty. He threw open the door of the guards' sleeping room—nobody was there.

He started to rush outside, but the agonizing pain in his head caused him to collapse at the desk, where he sat, clutching his head, groaning and nearly fainting.

Then a voice came to him: "Sergeant Castell!"

He raised his head. It was Eglanti. Behind him were the guards, all four; all were mudflecked.

"He pursued the prisoner. He escaped across the river."

Castell groaned and shut his eyes, because of the agony in his head.

"We spread out, but couldn't find him."

Castell said in a thick voice, "He can't live in the jungle."

"Perhaps not. But until we find his body he must be listed as escaped."

"We'll find his body. We'll find him. I've never had a prisoner escape."

Eglanti said, in his soft respectful voice, "There's blood on your head. You're hurt. You must go up to the compound for medical treatment." On the hill above the prison was the Commissioner's residence, and the other buildings of the colony where upper officials lived; the Commissioner had as little as possible to do with the prison, leaving its operation in the care of the Sergeant.

"Later." Castell was on his feet; but the pain was excruciating, and everything was blurred and swaying. "Right now—must catch him." Even in his pain, his brain registered the consequence of a prisoner escaping.

"We've searched. It's useless. At least until morning. Perhaps in daylight we'll find him. Sit down. What did he attack you with?"

Castell fell back in the chair and stared up through a haze, seeing Eglanti's smooth pale face, his brown mustache, his bright brown eyes. "He didn't. Somebody else. You."

"Sir?"

"You. Came behind me, hit me. Took my gun. You let him go."

"Really, Sergeant, you shouldn't be talking. You and you!" Crisply, to two of the guards, the note of authority sharp in his voice, Eglanti said, "Help the Sergeant up. Get him to the compound, to the doctor. I'll go to the Commissioner and make my report."

"No," said Castell. "I order you under arr—" But everything gave way for him then and he fell into whirling blackness.

He was in the tiny compound hospital for several days, unable to speak. Then the time came that he opened his eyes and gazed into the tight little face of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner had a paper, from which he read:

"I am instructed by the capital to reduce you to rank of private, and you are dishonorably discharged from the service. According to Article 49 of the Military Prisons Code, you are hereby sentenced to fulfill the term of the prisoner Da Pinta, whom you permitted to escape, such sentence to be served at this prison, commencing immediately on completion of your stay in the hospital."

"Am I permitted to say anything?"

"What can be said? You were in charge, the prisoner escaped."

"He can't have escaped. He's dead, either in the jungle or the river."

"A search has failed to produce his body."

"The crocodiles ate him. Or jaguars. How could a man in his condition possibly have survived?"

"I am not here to argue. I have read you the sentence, which by law is mandatory."

"Eglanti did it," Castell said. "He hit me from behind with his gun." He looked over the Commissioner's shoulder. Eglanti stood there, watching him with his bright eyes.

"That's merely a statement. Do you have any proof?" asked the Commissioner.

"No."

"Then there's no point discussing it, is there?"

Castell said, his voice low, "I've served here sixteen years. With never a mark against me. Is that work nothing?"

"The sentence is mandatory," said the Commissioner. "There is no appeal." He turned and marched out.

Castell stared at Eglanti. The latter smiled.

Castell said, "I suppose you're Sergeant now."

"I've been appointed—pending approval from the capital, of course."

"That's why you did it, isn't it? To become Sergeant."

Eglanti said softly, "My beloved's father is a Sergeant-Major. He'll be much more inclined to accept me now."

"You ruined me for another strap on your shoulder."

"Here in the colony values are their own. Each must do what he can to get what he craves."

There was a hope in the early weeks that Da Pinta's body would be found. In that case it would be maintained that he had failed to serve out his term because of unavoidable circumstance—namely, death; and Castell would be relieved of the burden of completing Da Pinta's sentence, although the dishonorable discharge would stand. Still, at 45, there would be some kind of life Castell could find.

But the hope faded. And it was finally, utterly dashed one evening when Sergeant Eglanti came to his cell.

"Are you wondering how the search is going?" Eglanti asked.

"Are you still searching?"

"Why shouldn't we be?"

"Yes, why shouldn't you? After all, you're the Sergeant now. You're in charge. What can you lose if you find his body?"

Eglanti's mustache curved. "That would put you outside—and for my safety I prefer you inside. Yes, we are still searching"—his voice was low—"but the body will never be found."

Castell felt a chill.

"No. You see, I found Da Pinta that first night. Directed the others away and followed his trail. Shot him by the bank of the river and dumped the body in—along with your gun. Of course the crocodiles immediately got the blood scent. And all that will ever be found of Da Pinta will be a few unidentifiable bones."

"So you confess everything. Including attacking me."

"Of course. No harm now. You'll never see the Commissioner again."

"I could tell the other guards."

"They will have no interest in your ravings. You're just another prisoner now."

And so he was—toiling in his chains on the dam that would never be finished, swilling down the mess they served him at morning and evening, gradually collapsing within, the rot of despair, the longing for death, setting in. His one compelling thought, all that kept him going, was to do unto Eglanti as Eglanti had done unto him.

Lately he had stopped washing, letting filth accumulate on his body and in his cell—like a man with an obsessive plan who has no thought of any other thing.

Saturday visitors would come and there would be an inspection. A day or so later the boat that had brought them would depart—and on it would be Eglanti.

"Friday," Castell muttered, staring at the tiny patch of purple through the barred window. "Friday it must be."

Friday he toiled in his chains on the dam. A strange joy began to fill him. Faith in his plan soared. This would be the last day. His sick, pain-racked body would find peace. More important, his mind would find peace. Tonight Eglanti would come to him. Tonight he would pay back Eglanti.

He gazed at the oozing brown waters below the dam. Brown and green shapes lay in it, like rocks. They were the backs and heads of crocodiles, floating. The river was alive with them. Da Pinta had made a meal for them, and it had probably been consumed in an instant. Those sluggish bodies could move like streaks when the smell of blood promised a feast.

Castell smiled, even as he bent to lift a heavy stone, and a grimace remained on his lips as he staggered with it in his quivering arms, to drop it in its place at the end of the dam.

The sun began to drop. Other prisoners, eyeing the still crocodiles, cautiously rinsed themselves at the edge of the river. Not Castell. He walked in his chains and his muck back to the prison.

He lay awhile, then got up and brushed caked mud from his torso. His supper came. He ate the mess and pushed the plate and cup back through the grille, which fell and clanked shut.

Now Eglanti would be eating, and if he followed his usual custom, would soon come sauntering down to visit with his favorite victim.

Castell crouched on the floor, working feverishly, making solid the weapon that would bring about his vengeance.

He heard Eglanti's boots. The weapon was ready. Castell tucked it under his mat. He straightened and was standing at the barred window, staring out, when Eglanti's boots stopped in front of the door.

The lock clicked and the door shrilled open. Castell turned. Eglanti pushed the door shut, locked it, and hooked the ring of keys in his belt. "What were you staring at?"

"The moon."

"The moon's barely up yet. You couldn't see it from here. You're losing your mind, Castell."

Castell shrugged. He turned again to the window.

"No, the moon is an illusion. Like your illusion of revenge . . . Inspection tomorrow, remember? A clean bright cell.

And to the river with you, early, to wash your filthy clothes and body."

Eglanti had come up beside him. His hand rested on the gun at his hip—as if there were any way Castell's scrawny arm could pluck it from its clip. "The moon," said Eglanti, looking out. "No, not the moon, just the purple sky, a few stars . . . do you really imagine you see the moon?"

"A small part of it, off to the corner." Castell had drawn away a few feet and was now near the mat. He watched Eglanti's head turn to the right, away from him, staring up, and quickly bent his knees and retrieved his weapon, which he held at his side.

Eglanti chuckled. "An illusion only. A spot on your brain. There's no moon to be seen."

Castell took a step forward and swung with all his strength at the strong round neck that showed under the bulge of Eglanti's brown hair. At the last split second the Sergeant sensed something and hunched his shoulders—but the weapon crashed softly against the spot Castell had mentally marked.

Eglanti's face smashed against the bars. He groaned. Castell, panting, drew back to swing again, but the Sergeant slid down the padded wall and lay crumpled at his feet.

Castell stared down. The smooth face was pallid, the eyes were closed. A blue vertical line, oozing blood, marked the forehead.

Castell plucked at the fat dirty sock he held in his hand, untying the knot he had made in the top, and turned it over, spilling out the hard dried mud he had accumulated, the muck from the river that he had brought in nightly on his body. He took apart the weapon that was the only one he could have possibly smuggled into his cell. He threw the sock in the corner with the rest of his filthy clothes, and kicked the pile of dried mud about. Let them stew over it later, wonder what had been his weapon of vengeance.

Bending, he released the catch of Eglanti's holster-clip and pulled out the pistol. From the belt he unhooked the ring of keys. He knew well enough every key on it. He looked again at the fallen body, and smiled thinly. Then he let himself out of his cell, pulled the door behind him, and locked it.

Down the corridor was the office. A guard sat there at the desk, working on a report. Two guards would be off in the kitchen eating; and in the room behind the closed door of the office, the two night guards slept.

The guard looked up, and his eyes went wide and fearful as he stared at Castell, wearing only his torn filthy pants, the key ring thrust in them, and holding the gun.

"Get up." Castell went behind him, pressed his thumb on the clip, and took out the guard's gun.

"Now come with me." He laid the guard's gun on the desk.

"What are you going to do?"

"Take you for a walk."

They walked out of the prison. There was a cleared area, then the path into the jungle. Little moonlight showed yet, but Castell could have walked the path blindfolded. He had walked it nearly every day for 17 years.

The guard walked in front. "Have you killed the Sergeant?"

"No." Castell smiled. "He's strong and young. He has a long life ahead of him."

They walked half a mile. Now they were near the river bank.

"Go back," said Castell. "Raise the alarm. By the time you do I'll be across the river, and safe."

"But—you can't live in the jungle."

"Go back. I'll be watching you. If you stop, even for a moment, I'll kill you."

He watched until the man was out of sight. He waited, in case the guard might stop and return—but after a minute it was clear he would be making his way as fast as possible back along the path to the prison.

Castell turned and walked on. He was at the river now, gleaming—sickly brown under the rising moon—with shapes in it here and there, like rocks.

He stepped down and into the water. To his left rose the jutting mass of the dam that would never be finished. He stood a moment, picturing Eglanti there, toiling in chains, gasping under the weight of heavy stones. Castell smiled.

He dropped the ring of keys into the water. He walked out until the water was nearly to his waist. The gun was at his head now. He walked slowly, watching shapes like rocks—but now the rocks were moving, slowly, toward him. He thought of Eglanti, and felt at peace.

One of the shapes darted suddenly, in a rush of water made silver by its charge. Castell pulled the trigger. His body fell forward. There was a film of blood on the water, and all the dark shapes rushed to the place.

Ellery Queen

Dead Ringer

In which Ellery is once more called in on a case involving the security of the United States . . .

Detective: ELLERY QUEEN

The hush-hush man's name was Storke, and Ellery had once before worked with him on a case involving the security of the United States. So when Storke showed up out of nowhere and said, "Scene of the crime first, the rundown later," Ellery dropped what he was doing and reached for his hat without a question.

Storke drove him downtown, chatting pleasantly, parked on one of the meandering side streets below Park Row in a space that was magically unoccupied, and strolled Ellery over to a thin shop-front with a dusty window bearing the crabbed legend: *M. Merrilees Monk, Tobacconist, Est. 1897.*

Two young men who looked like Wall Street clerks on their dinner hour lounged outside, puffing on pipes. There was no sign of a police uniform.

"This must be a big one," murmured Ellery; and he preceded Storke into the shop.

It was as aged-looking inside as out, narrow and poorly lighted, with walls of some musty dark wood, Victorian fixtures, and a gas-jet for lighting cigarettes and cigars. Everything was pungent with tobacco.

In the deeps of the little shop, near the curtained doorway to a rear room, stood a venerable wooden Indian, his original splendor bedraggled to a sprinkle of color here and there; most of him was naked pitted wood.

The Indian appeared forlorn, whereas the dead man who lay jammed between the counter and the shelves looked outraged, for he had suffered cruelly at the hands not of time but of an assassin. His head and face resembled a jellied mash.

Curiously, his dead arms embraced a large squarish canister

apparently used for the storage of pipe tobacco, for it was labeled MIX C and obviously came from a row of similar canisters on one of the upper shelves behind the cluttered counter.

"He was attacked from behind at this point," Ellery said to Storke, indicating a stiffening puddle at the feet of the wooden Indian, "probably as he was going into the back room for something. The killer must have left him for dead; but he wasn't dead, because this blood trail goes from the Indian all the way around and behind the counter to where he's lying now.

"The picture is unmistakable: When the killer left, this man somehow—don't ask me how!—managed to drag himself to that particular spot, and in spite of his frightful injuries reached up to that tobacco can and took it down from that empty space on the shelf before he died."

"That's the way I read it, too," said Storke.

"May I handle the canister?"

"Everything's been processed."

Ellery took the canister from the dead man, who seemed disposed to resist, and pried off the lid. The canister was empty. He borrowed a powerful magnifier from the hush-hush man. After a moment he put the lens down.

"This canister never contained tobacco, Storke. Not a shred or speck is visible under the glass, even at the seams."

Storke said nothing; and Ellery turned to the shelves. Nine canisters remained on the shelf from which the dead man had taken the MIX C can. They were labeled MONK'S SPECIAL, BARTLEBY MIXTURE, SUPERBA BLEND, MIX A, MIX B, (and here was the space where the MIX C can must have stood), KENTUCKY LONG CUT, VIRGINIA CRIMP, LORD CAVENDISH, and MANHATTAN MIX.

"Those nine are *not* empty," said Storke, reading Ellery's mind. "Each contains what it's labeled."

Ellery squatted by the corpse. It was enveloped in a knee-length tobacconist's gown in the British fashion—a rather surprisingly muscular body of a man in his early 40s with what must once have been a sandy-fringed bald pate and sharp Anglican features.

"This, I take it, was M. Merrilees Monk," Ellery said. "Or his lineal descendant."

"Wrong on both counts," Storke replied bitterly. "He was one of our topflight operatives, and don't mention him in the same breath with Monk. As far as we know, Monk's grandfather and father were respectable tobacconists, but the incumbent is a

turncoat who ran this shop as a drop for foreign agents to pick up and pass along messages, stolen material, and so on.

"We got onto Monk only recently. We put the shop under round-the-clock surveillance, but we weren't able to spot any known enemy agent entering or leaving.

"Then we got what we thought was a break. One of our Seattle men, Hartman, turned out to be a dead ringer for this Monk rat. So we brought Hartman on from the Coast, put him through an intensive training/course on Monk, then took Monk into custody in the middle of one night, substituted Hartman, and called off our outside men to leave Hartman a clear field in the shop. He knew the risk he was running."

"And it caught up with him. Dead ringer is right." Ellery brooded over the battered U.S. agent's remains. "How long had he been playing the part of Monk?"

"Fifteen days. And no one turned up, Hartman was positive. He spent his spare time in the stockroom out back, microfilming the shop's ledger, which lists the names of hundreds of Monk's customers, each with an account number and address. Good thing he did, too, because the killer's made off with the ledger.

"Just this morning," Storke went on somberly, "Hartman phoned in that he'd found out two of the listed customers were foreign agents—exactly how we'll probably never know, because he didn't get a chance to explain. A customer walked in at that moment and he had to hang up. By the time we felt it safe to make contact with him tonight, he'd been murdered. One or both of the agents must have paid a visit to the shop as Hartman was closing up and spotted him as a ringer."

"They probably had a signal Hartman missed." Ellery stared at the empty tobacco canister. "Storke, why have you called me in on this?"

"You're looking at the reason."

"The mix c can? It was almost certainly Monk's repository for whatever was delivered to him to be passed along. But if it contained any spy material at the time Hartman was assaulted, Storke, his killer or killers took it and blew."

"Exactly," said the hush-hush man. "That means Hartman made that superhuman effort in order to take down an *empty* can. Why was his last act to call our attention to the can?"

"Obviously he was trying to tell you something."

"Of course," said Storke impatiently. "But what? That's what

we can't figure out, Ellery, and that's why I called you in. Any notions?"

"Yes," said Ellery. "He was telling you who the foreign agents are."

Storke was not given to displays of emotion, but on this occasion astonishment slackened his jaw and widened his shrewd eyes.

"Well, he hasn't told me a damned thing," the hush-hush man growled. "Now I suppose you'll say he's told you?"

"Well," said Ellery, "yes."

"Told you *what*?"

"Who the two foreign agents are."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER

*How did Ellery know the identity of
the two foreign agents?*

Ellery explained to Storke: "Two of the facts you gave me were: first, that the foreign agents are listed in Monk's customer ledger; second, that each customer's name in the ledger is assigned an account number.

"Hartman made his extraordinary dying effort to call your attention to the otherwise empty can labeled MIX C. MIX C — two word-elements. And there are two agents. This could be a coincidence, but it could also mean that each of the word-elements identifies one of the agents.

"Pursuing this theory, I noticed something unusual about the letters composing the words MIX C that is not true about any of the phrases on the nine other labels on the shelf: *every letter in MIX C is also a Roman numeral*.

"You take MIX. M equals 1000; ix equals 10 minus 1, or 9. MIX therefore becomes the Roman numerology for 1009. I'm sure you will find, Storke, that the customer's name listed in the ledger microfilms opposite Number 1009 is that of one of the two foreign agents.

"C is simply the Roman numeral for 100, and I think you'll find Number 100 in the ledger is the name of the other agent."

“Q”

Florence V. Mayberry

Woman Trouble

If there's any writer, man or woman, who depicts the Reno-Las Vegas-Nevada scene with more conviction than Florence V. Mayberry, we don't know who it is. All her stories project the "spirit of place," but equally important, perhaps even more so, all her stories are packed with "heart." There's a catch, often a sob, in her voice and a lump in our throats. . .

I never did like living in Reno. I'm a desert woman, born and raised just outside Winnemucca, Nevada. Trees and buildings, and all those crowds milling around day and night on the streets get in my way. I like to see clear and far off. Horizons, mountains. Even people stand out better in the open desert. You can see them coming, all alone and separate instead of muffled up in all that town stuff.

Have you ever smelled, real good, the sage coming in off the desert after a rain? Clean, heady, sweet. Seems to scour out the lungs and makes your brain fresh. You can remember you've got a heart, even a soul. Well, that's what I wanted for Paddy.

Paddy belongs to the desert. Wyoming country, he was born there. Up where buttes are swept by winds and you have to struggle a little to fill your lungs with oxygen, it's so high in the sky, you know. Couple of years after we were married Paddy took me back to his old home ranch. Well, it wasn't his any longer—he'd lost it fooling around in Nevada's gambling clubs. But the people who bought it from the bank are nice folks, old friends of the family, and they pretended the ranch was still Paddy's.

Paddy and I rode alongside the buttes, sometimes stopping the horses and edging them together so we could kiss. "Paddy," I told him, "let's save up and buy back your ranch. Town's no good for us, we're open-country people." Especially town's no good for Paddy, I was thinking, and he knew it.

He grinned and said, "You're right, girl. No dice tables out here on the open range." He patted my arm and added, "First big kill-

ing I make, and I sure ought to be due for one soon, we'll buy us a spread. Build us a brand-new house on it with all the fixings, good as back in Reno."

Good as! My God. A two-room-with-kitchenette apartment. A stove with an oven which baked lopsided. A dwarf-sized refrigerator. And all the gambling tables in the world, it seemed, just down the street.

"Paddy, I don't need fine things, I'm not used to them. It would be fun to camp out in a cabin, cook on a woodstove—nothing bakes good like a wood range. It would be like when I was a kid. Home-baked bread—my mother always did her own baking and she taught me. And we could have a little garden, Paddy. You'd be outdoors a lot—indoors don't suit you, Paddy, staying in that warehouse all the time, lifting those heavy loads."

"Lifting loads, woman?" His face took on that remote expression he always got when he decided I had gone too far interfering in men's ways. "You mean pushing so hard on those little levers that do all the lifting? With a hundred-eighty-pounds, six-one of a man to do the pushing? Well, Angie, I sure got a hard life."

I wanted to say it was lifting the dice, shaking them, tossing them out that was too much for a hundred-eighty-pounds, six-one of a man. But when he got that look Paddy scared me. No, no, I don't mean he ever hit me or roughed me up. He never did. Why, Paddy would just spit on the ground when he heard about men who hit women. Said only feisty little men did that who were too scared to tackle a man. But once, after that look, Paddy had walked out of our apartment and didn't come back. It took me a week to find him. Down in Vegas. And another week to beg him back.

That time I wished he had hit me instead. All the money we had in our joint savings account, \$715, went that time. To the last penny. It takes a lot of standing on your feet and waiting on customers in a department store to get that much put away above what it costs to live these days.

Paddy didn't believe in savings accounts, even though I had his name on the bank book. Said it was for men who didn't have the guts to take a chance, or for women. That's why it didn't bother him when he drew it out. Grinned, patted me on the back, and said he'd pay it back one of these days with interest.

Me, I didn't care if he ever paid it back. All I wanted back was Paddy.

Like that evening later on when I was snuggling my face against his, whispering I wouldn't trade him for the whole world tied in ribbons.

He kissed me and whispered back, "You're a good kid." Then he scooted me off his lap, stood up, gave me a little smack on the bottom, and said, "Think I'll begin my first million tonight. So I can get you that little ranch you're always talking about. Only it'll be a big one. Maybe I'll try for two million, so's I can fence it in with those ribbons you're always talking about."

"Oh, Paddy, please! Don't go, Paddy. I don't want to be rich. I don't even need the ranch. Paddy, you know it's just you I need. And you've been away so much lately. Every night, Paddy, the last few weeks."

"Maybe there'll be a few more nights, too," he said easily. "Stick with it, one of these nights I'll strike it rich."

"I'll go with you, Paddy."

His face set. "No. You bug me at the tables."

No use arguing with Paddy. Unless I wanted to set out on another search all over Nevada.

I remember it rained that night in Reno. A good steady rain. Once I thought, I'll just go along Virginia Street, down the alley by the clubs, find out which one Paddy's in, say it was raining hard and that I'd brought him an umbrella. But it scared me to think of the way his face would look—*I'm a man, Angie, don't wet-nurse me. You bug me at the tables, Angie.* Or maybe he wouldn't say anything. Just never come home.

I'd rather he hit me every day, honest I would.

I woke up in the morning and felt for him next to me. The sheet was cool, untouched. All around me, all through the apartment, was the sweet sage smell that rises off the desert after a rain. But it wouldn't make the ache in my head go away. I perked some coffee, waited a while to eat, and hoped he would show up before he had to go to work. And I said to myself, *Damn the gambling and the gamblers, damn Reno to hell.*

Reno could have been a nice place, you know. A sweet hometown with the Truckee River running through, willows all along it. Over to the west, Mount Rose with snow still on it in summer. Old brown fat Peavine Mountain squatting toward the north. And the clean lovely desert spread to the east. My God, it could have been nice to live in with the man you love. Only it wasn't.

I left a place set at the table in case he showed up. Then I went down on Virginia Street, making like I was window shopping. At 6:30 in the morning, yet! Hoping I'd see him, but that he wouldn't see me: *Angie, you trying to make a woman out of me? I thought you married me because I was a man.* At 6:30 he could be grabbing a bite to eat at one of the club lunch counters, because he had to be at work by seven.

Then I saw him. Coming out of a club with a tall red-blond holding onto his arm, almost head-high with him. Laughing, throwing her head back, tossing her long shiny hair. She had on a long black dress and it fit her like she was the model on which all women ought to be patterned. I noticed that especially because I'm short and stocky-built. Not fat or anything, just short and stocky-built, the strong kind. I used to help my Dad chop wood—Mother and Dad never had any boys.

I wanted to walk over and sock the girl in the nose. But I always have a sense to be fair about things. It was Paddy who needed the sock in the nose. How would the girl know Paddy belonged to me if he didn't tell her?

I speeded up and came even with them just as she leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. Paddy had his arm up hailing a taxi. I said, "Hi, Paddy, won't you be late for work?"

Paddy was a gambler. His face stayed cool and easy, and it was like hoods dropped over his eyes so I couldn't see into them. "Hi, Angie," he said with his mouth. But I could feel the inside of him saying, *Get the hell out of here.* That wasn't fair. He was the one on the spot, not me. Besides, this was woman trouble. I'd never had woman trouble with Paddy before. Far as I knew. A wife can't buckle under when it's woman trouble.

"I laid out your breakfast on the table—you shouldn't go to work on an empty stomach. Paddy, I don't think I've met your friend."

I was talking to Paddy, but I was looking square at this woman. Woman she was, somewhere between 25 and 30, not much younger than me. She had the skin and the looks of an 18-year-old, only young kids don't get that confident look on them. This woman looked strong and sure of herself, like maybe she'd fought her way up.

She was beautiful, I'll say that. Her eyes were so blue their color almost hurt you to look at. Big, too. Only thing, they stared at me bold as brass, shrewd too. Had me figured first look, and it

was striking her funny. She took on a little half smile like she was holding back a laugh.

She knew how to put on makeup, just enough to turn her skin to honey and rose. Or maybe the Lord shot the works on her, maybe she was born that way. Makeup on her eyes, though, and lashes that almost brushed her cheeks. And like a halo, all that red-blond hair.

"Is this your wife?" she asked Paddy.

He nodded and said, easy, "Sure is. Angie meet Molly."

She looked him level in the eye, laughed, and said, "You're a cool one, I'll say that for you." She turned to me. "Chin up, lady, so he can take a poke at it for good measure." She laughed again, climbed in the taxi and drove off.

What she said shook Paddy. He whipped his face away from the taxi like he'd been slapped, and he didn't give me that goodbye look like he had just before he'd hopped off for Vegas. He said, "I'm sorry, Angie. But you shouldn't have come looking for me. And I'm not going to lie to you, tell you I was just coming out to put her in the taxi. I was going with her."

Well, I couldn't hardly jump on him after that. I mean, he'd come square with me. So I said, "I'm sorry too, Paddy. See you tonight. I've fixed up a good roast for dinner." *Last night while you made up to this Molly with her bold, laughing, beautiful face, I was home cooking for you. I'm not ugly, Paddy. I got big brown eyes, nice features—you told me it's brown eyes you like, not blue like yours. You said brown eyes always got you.*

He let a deep breath sigh out and said, "Okay. See you tonight."

"You've never hit me, Paddy. Not once. She shouldn't have said that."

Kind of like it hurt as the words came out he said, "She's seen 'em hit." Then he turned and walked off.

What do you do when you love a man and as far as you know he's never two-timed you before, and then you find out he did—or was going to? And you begin thinking maybe all those gambling nights and the money gone, that \$715 out of the savings account—maybe it wasn't all for gambling?

You brood on it, if you're like me.

All day long while I was selling girdles, pantyhose, and things, I couldn't stop thinking about that tall bold Molly. The way she laughed and told off Paddy, and him standing there looking like he could eat her. And the contempt she'd had for his dumb wife.

Paddy was there when I got home. He didn't say anything, just pulled me down on his lap and kissed my forehead and my eyes. "You got nice eyes, Angie," he said. "They never did see nothing bad about me. You got nice lovin' eyes."

That's all. What I wanted to say was such a big lump in me that I was afraid to let it out. So I just kissed him.

But after dinner I said, "Paddy, let's pull out and go on up to Wyoming. We could save for our own place up there as well—maybe better—as here in Reno. I could find a job and maybe you could get us a little house on a ranch where you'd work. There's an old cabin on your home place, maybe they'd rent it to us and we could fix it up. Get our roots in."

"One of these days," he said. "Maybe."

He helped me with the dishes that night—usually he didn't do that, said he felt silly lifting teacups with a rag in his hand. But that night he helped me. And he kissed me sweet. Tender, it was. Never once mentioned going to the clubs. It was wonderful.

But sometime in the night—well, it was two o'clock when I turned on the light—I found myself alone in the bed. Paddy was nowhere in the apartment.

Molly, her name was. *Angie, meet Molly*. That's all, no last name. How do you find a Molly in a place as big as Reno?

You get up and dress and go down to the gambling clubs and start looking for Paddy. Or Molly.

But I didn't go. Paddy needed some kind of honor, even if it was the kind I made up myself.

Around four o'clock I laid out some potatoes, ready to fry the way Paddy likes them. Set the table pretty. Listened for the creak of the elevator which meant somebody was coming up. Went to the bathroom to do what I could about my face. Bluish circles under my eyes smudged the upper part of my face. Face puffy from worry and lack of sleep—or like a puff adder getting mad, ready to strike. I was only in my early thirties, but this morning I looked 40 or more. Little dumpy woman. Why wouldn't Paddy, eyes blue as heaven, six-one of muscle, a sidewise grin, why wouldn't—

"Stop it!" I told myself in the mirror. "Stop it!"

Paddy loved me. He told me so lots of times. And Paddy never lied, no matter what else he did.

I put the potatoes away in the refrigerator, drank a cup of coffee, and walked to work. It wasn't far, and besides we didn't have

a car any more. Used to, but Paddy hit a winning streak a year or so back and wanted to raise his bets. So I signed the car over—it was in my name—and Paddy sold it. Oh, well, it costs money for gas.

It's tough to stand on your feet all day, straightening up counters that customers are always messing up the minute you've folded things. It's tough smiling, when you ache all over from wondering where Paddy's gone to. I thought once I'd call him at work. But if he was there he'd be mad. And if he wasn't there his boss would be mad knowing Paddy's wife was hunting for him again.

I tried to eat a sandwich at lunch, but it just wouldn't go down. So I asked my boss could I go home, I didn't feel good. He was real nice, told me not to come back till I felt completely okay. They like me at work. Steady, always on time. Just a dumb, steady, day-after-day salesclerk that redheaded Molly wouldn't be caught dead being.

I went home and took a couple of aspirins. Tried to lie down and relax. Got up and mopped the kitchen and bathroom. Took a shower. Put on my new coral pants suit. Took it off. Broad as a barn door from the rear. Put on a long straight jersey dress. Looked like a Japanese wrestler in a nightgown. Finally put back on the dark dress I had worn to work. And it was past five o'clock and no Paddy.

Well, Reno's free and open—anybody can go in the clubs and play a few nickels and dimes in the slot machines. That's what I'd tell Paddy if I saw him. But maybe he wouldn't see me. I could hide behind the machines, leave once I knew where—no. Not if he was with Molly.

I walked my legs off that night. Tried to eat a hamburger. Couldn't make it. Got to bed around three in the morning. Alone.

Next morning I called at work and said I was still sick. It was no lie. I was sick. The boss was nice, said to take care of myself. So I was ashamed to walk the streets, running in and out of clubs. I stayed in the apartment. Which was good because Paddy's boss telephoned and asked what happened to him the last two days. "We're sick," I said. What kind of sick? "We must have eaten something funny. Sick to our stomachs."

"Yeah," his boss said. "Not down in Vegas again, is he, Angie, and you packing to go find him?"

"Listen, Pete, can't a man have a stomachache without—"

"Okay, okay, Angie, cool it. Take care of yourselves. Tell Paddy to forget about tomorrow, it's Saturday, he might as well get a good start on Monday."

"Thanks, Pete, I'll tell him."

If Paddy was in the clubs he was like a ghost slipping in and out, because I hit them all. And that wasn't Paddy's style. Even losing, he'd stick at one table, waiting for the odds to break his way. And Paddy hadn't left for Vegas, he was still in Reno. My insides told me so.

They kept telling me something else. Paddy was with Molly.

So I concentrated on how I could find Molly.

You ever looked over the list of attorneys in the phone-book yellow pages? In Reno? You wonder how they all eat, except Reno's built on divorce as well as gambling—some fine recommendation for your hometown, huh? I started calling attorneys' offices and ran smack into, "Molly? The last name, please? You say you saw this lady drop her purse in one of the clubs and there's no identification in it, so how do you know the name is Molly? Oh. One of the dealers. Well, my suggestion would be to ask that dealer about her, or turn over the purse to the cashier or the police." A long pause. "May I ask why you didn't just give it to the lady?" Or, "I'm sorry but we never give out clients' names. Why don't you try the police?"

Well, it was a dumb try anyway.

I thought, why not go down to that club where I first saw Paddy with her and ask around.

Down to the club. Jangling, brassy sound of slot machines, busy, busy. Everybody pulling handles like it was a job doing some good, like cleaning up the world or something every time a coin dropped in. Most of the time nothing was coming out, no loaf of bread or can of beans, nothing. Once in a while a little money to be stuffed back into the machine.

"Say, do you know a pretty redhead named Molly? Tall girl, dressed good. She was here the other night. I—I've got something I think may belong to her. I got to find her."

The dealer at the blackjack table grinned sidewise and said, "Honey, I hope it's something nice you got for her. If it is, you might try the office. Something different, you better take it home. No, I don't know any tall redhead named Molly."

I tried a couple of other dealers. Then the lunch counter. A waitress there said, "Say, aren't you Paddy Finley's wife?"

I nodded and she said, "I thought so. See, I used to live in your same apartment house, couple of floors below, but I used to see you come in together."

"I've got something may be this Molly's," I said again. "The other day down here I saw her with—something like it. But I don't know where to find her. I just thought someone here might know her."

She gave me a quirky smile. "I don't know her, honey, but I do know Paddy, he's here a lot. Hard to miss Paddy, looks like kids used to think cowboy heroes ought to look. Eastern divorcees still think that. You know what I'd do, Mrs. Finley—I'd go home, take two-three aspirins, and have yourself a nice rest. Then when Paddy came home you'd be in shape to flatten him. Wanta cup of coffee, I'll throw in the aspirin?"

It's peculiar, how when your mind's upset it's the middle of your stomach that hurts. Like a knot tied in it. But all the time the real hurt is in your mind where you can't touch it.

Out on the street, up a way, I got this queer feeling. Like I wanted to shake all over but was too frozen to do it. I felt something either pulling on me or breathing on me. I mean, it was screwy, like I was a Geiger Counter and had run into what I was looking for. I turned.

Across Second Street, headed towards the alley that leads into the clubs, was Molly. Wearing a long bright-green skirt and a white turtleneck sweater. With all that pretty reddish hair in a big topknot, like she was deliberately making herself taller than she already was. Conspicuous, you know?

Paddy wasn't with her.

I was so relieved I felt like I ought to walk over and apologize to her. Instead I went close to the store windows, turned, and watched her swing along the street. Like she'd owned Reno so long she'd even forgotten it belonged to her.

Then I saw him, Paddy. Walking fast behind her, his long legs giving at the knee in that little bend that cow-punchers never quite lose. He came up to her, grabbed her arm, flung her face to face with him. She wasn't surprised. Just took on a strong bold look. Said something. Laughed. He grabbed her throat and shook her back and forth. Her long legs kicked at him, her fingers raked his cheeks. Her knee came up hard. Paddy staggered back, bent over. Even from across the street I could see he was pale, sick.

Molly turned away, cool as you please, not even touching her

throat though it was bound to be hurting. Bold as brass. Still owning the town, she was.

I cut across the traffic to Paddy. He was leaning against a building, while people clustered around staring, eyes thrilled like they were watching a movie being shot.

"Paddy, let's go home."

Somebody snickered.

Flames shot through me. Like a chimney long unused and then too much paper is put in the firepot and the soot blazes and sets the house on fire. I plunged into the ring of gawkers, punching, slapping, screaming for them to mind their own business, to leave my Paddy alone.

I felt hands on my shoulders. Paddy's hands. "Angie, that's enough. Let's get out of here."

The crowd parted and we walked through it, turned towards the river. Paddy hailed a taxi and we got in it. Paddy wasn't walking too good.

"That Molly—that Molly, why did you—" I began after we shut the door of our apartment.

"I don't want to talk about it," Paddy said, his face white and drawn. He went in the bathroom and closed the door.

I made some coffee, then stood by the stove wondering whether he'd rather have steak or soup. Or if either of us ever wanted to eat again.

It's hard for a wife of twelve years not to ask her man why he chokes a girl he's just met. If he just met her. Especially with Paddy always spitting on the ground at the mention of men who hit women. Said they ought to take out their mad on wrangling horses or find a man their size or bigger. Now he was choking Molly. Like she had set him crazy.

And then she bested him, right in the middle of Reno with his wife and a crowd watching. *Damn you, Paddy, how'd that look in the papers if a cop had been around and taken you both to the station and me, too? The papers saying your girl friend beat you up and your wife beat up the crowd for snickering. Like you were some ragdoll for women to toss around. Damn you, Paddy, how'd you like that?*

Paddy was a long time in the bathroom. I heard the bath water running. When he came out he was shaved and had on clean underthings I kept in a bureau for him in the bathroom. "I got soup hot and steak ready to broil," I said as he went through the

living room to the bedroom, that's the screwy way our apartment was.

"I don't want anything."

I heard him moving around the bedroom. Pretty soon he came out, dressed up, and his suitcase in his hand. "So long, Angie," he said.

"You can't go like this, Paddy. It's not right, it's not fair to me. We got to talk. Listen, Paddy, I can overlook what happened. Just tell me why, then we won't talk about it any more."

"This time don't come looking for me," he said, staring straight ahead at the outside door.

"Paddy, you don't want her after what she done—she don't want you, you don't want a woman don't want you. But I want you."

"So long, Angie."

"Paddy, let's pack up and head for Wyoming, get out of this damn state with its no-good life, gambling, and loose women like—"

He wheeled on me, his eyes blue fire. "Don't say her name!"

He opened the door and went out. I just followed him, like a puppy dog that's been kicked but won't stay home. Down the hall after him. He took the stairs instead of the elevator, his long legs going fast. I kept up. Outside on the sidewalk, down to the corner, me with no purse or anything.

He turned and said, "Angie, I don't want you no more." He started walking again, with me right behind.

He began running. I'm stubby-built, but I've got lasting power. I ran behind him, down almost to Virginia Street. Paddy stopped and I stood beside him.

"You want to go along and hear me tell her I love her before I — kill her?"

"You're not going to kill anybody."

"Okay, just keep hanging onto my tail." He started walking, and I did too. We crossed the Truckee Bridge, over by the old Post Office, past the Holiday Hotel. Turned back again, the opposite direction, with him trying to lose me, up the hill above the river, then we turned again.

"You got no pride, Angie," he said over his shoulder.

What's pride? It don't fill emptiness. I kept walking.

Finally he stopped in front of a fine old house above the river, not far from downtown, that was split into apartments. "She lives here," Paddy said, "I'm going in. And if she's not there I'll wait

for her. Because she's mine, she's not going to change her mind just because she's got her divorce and is tired of playing around. Angie, you go get you a divorce. I'm taking Molly. One way or another."

He went up the porch steps, through the entrance, up the stairs. Me back of him. At the top of the stairs he turned and said, "You're asking for it, Angie," and hauled back his arm. I stood, waiting for it. If he hit me, maybe he'd think of me the way he did Molly. But his hand dropped.

He knocked on a door, with a number 3 on it. Inside were footsteps and a woman asked, "Who is it?" Molly.

"You know who," Paddy said.

She laughed. "You want to get messed up again?" She slid a bolt fast on the other side and walked away.

Paddy stepped back and kicked the door. Ordinarily a kick that hard would have gone on through. But this was an old-fashioned house with heavy oak doors. Nothing happened except a big deep scar on the finish.

Paddy kicked again. Then he went crazy. Kept kicking that door like a bronco with a cactus under its saddle, his face a sick-gray and his eyes blazing. I pulled at him. He shook me off and kept kicking. Nobody came out of the apartment across the hall—the folks must have been gone. Downstairs a woman was yelling. The landlady, it turned out, who went back inside and called the police.

Suddenly the cops were there, no sirens or anything, and they were manhandling Paddy. It took the two of them to handcuff him and drag him downstairs. I stood there, frozen. One cop came back, knocked on Molly's door, asked her to open up and tell him what the trouble was. "No trouble of mine," she said through the door. "I didn't call you. Nobody came in my apartment. Just some stupid idiot kicking my door. Go talk to the one who called you."

"It's the police. We need information."

She didn't answer. He turned to me, "You in on this, lady? You trying to get inside, too?"

I shook my head. "I'm his wife. I never touched the door. He just wanted to talk to her. She wouldn't talk to him and he got mad. There wasn't any more to it than that, he just lost his temper."

"Some temper the way the door's beat up. You better come down to the station and tell the Chief about it."

"I'm his wife. I've got no complaint. And if I did, you can't make me say anything against Paddy, I'm his wife. I've got no complaint."

"Well, I have!" the landlady yelled behind us. "Breaking up my door, disturbing my tenants, you bet I'll complain, I'll follow you down to the station in my car."

"I'll pay for all the damage," I said. "You tell the Chief that."

The policeman and the landlady left and I sat down on the top stairstep, shaking like a Washoe Zephyr had struck me. After a bit the bolt slid on Molly's door and the door slowly opened.

She saw me. "Oh," she said.

I didn't say anything.

"You're his wife, aren't you?" I nodded.

"Listen, I'll be straight with you. When I first hit this town I bumped into Paddy. In one of the clubs. I was just getting my bearings, had noplac to go or anyone to see. And Paddy—well, he has a way with him. Anyway, I didn't know he was married, so we played around. Then you showed up, talking about breakfast. So I split. But he looked me up after that and said he'd left you. Kept hanging around. But frankly, lady, I run on a different track than Paddy. With bosses, not hired help. So I said bye-bye and he wouldn't listen. So he tried muscling me around." She laughed, high and hard. "Shows how stupid a good-looking guy can be. I was trained by pros, and he's an amateur."

"Paddy never once raised his hand to me."

She looked at me wise, and a little sad. "Maybe it would have worked out better if he had. Honest to God. Women!" She went back inside and closed the door.

I'd been trying to hate her. But I couldn't. I couldn't even hate Paddy. I felt nothing but sick, sitting there in a strange place like a cast-off ragdoll with its stuffing out.

I got up and went outdoors.

Like I said, it was an old-fashioned house turned into apartments. Whoever had changed it had made kind of a thing out of it being old-fashioned. They'd kept the old veranda, shaped like an L, and put up an old-time hanging porch swing around the corner from the house front. I felt so done in that I went and rested in the swing.

After a while a car drove up. It was the landlady looking like she'd bit into a chunk of iron. She stomped inside, never saw me. It got dark, but I just kept sitting there.

Maybe I had a hunch what would happen.

Molly came out of the house. She went down the steps to the sidewalk, her hair shimmering under the porch light and her long black dress swirled with embroidery that matched the color of her hair. When she reached the sidewalk, she turned towards town.

I heard footsteps, running from a clump of trees across the street. I stood up, my heart feeling like it filled my whole chest. Molly stopped, tall and defiant, turning towards the man who rushed at her. Paddy. I knew it would be Paddy. She laughed, never a flinch out of her. "Did that poor fool woman bail you out?"

"They didn't hold me. I paid for the door."

"Well, scram! You can't pay for me. The price is too high."

He called her a name. Then pleading like, his hands reaching out almost as if he was trying to climb up some slick and muddy riverbank, "Please, Molly. Please! I'm begging, Molly. I never felt this way before about anybody. I've got to have you, Molly!"

"Go to hell," she said. "I'm no horse you can break. So lay off the big he-man Wild West stuff with me."

Paddy swung. She dodged but the blow glanced her head. She staggered back. He came at her again, both his hands grabbing.

She must have reached in her purse. I couldn't see. I only heard a sharp crack, the sound reverberating in my ears until it made me dizzy. Paddy was on the ground, crawling around like he was trying to find something.

I floated down the steps, no feet, out to the sidewalk. Then Molly was down and I was pounding her head onto the concrete.

See Paddy out there? Gentlest man in the world. Sweet and quiet, just rocking on the porch. Hums to himself and rocks. Oh, now and again he walks out to the little corral I built and pets the mare I bought after I moved us up here to Wyoming. But Paddy just stays gentle and quiet, that's his real nature. That Molly had no right to stir him up, make fun of him. Then try to kill him. She turned him crazy, her face and her bigtime ways.

Right after the trial I brought Paddy back to Wyoming.

Yes, the trial scared me. Not so much for myself as for Paddy. Because if I got sent to the penitentiary, who'd look after him? That shot of Molly's addled him. Struck his head. Made him like a child. Sometimes he cries at night, gets on the floor and crawls around. Just like he did that night. Like he's looking for something he'll never find.

Molly didn't die right away. Not for almost two weeks after that night. But that didn't get me off. Manslaughter it was. In the heat of passion. And my lawyer brought out that I was protecting my husband. So they gave me a suspended sentence. On probation for three years. I have to check in every month.

So I rent this little house on Paddy's old home place from the folks who own it now. Family friends. They keep an eye on Paddy while I'm at work. Except for some nights Paddy's happy. Thinks the mare is a whole string of horses, calls her a lot of different names.

Me?

Well, I'm kind of happy, too. Kind of. No more worry about Paddy running off to the clubs. And by now I'm used to it.

Used to what?

Oh, like with the mare, Paddy calls me by a different name. Just one. Molly. So it hurts a little, but I just figure it's me who answers. Me, Angie.



Harold Q. Masur

Lawyer's Holiday

The first story by Harold Q. Masur to be published in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine was "The \$2,000,000 Defense," in our May 1958 issue, twenty years ago. Would you like to know the subsequent publishing history of that one short story? The day after the story's appearance on newsstands television rights were purchased for "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," and the show has been rerun at least twice. The story appeared in more than a dozen foreign magazines, even behind the Iron Curtain (in Hungary), and has been anthologized in several hardcover collections...

Now we give you Mr. Masur's first case about Scott Jordan to be published in EQMM—a hard-hitting, fast-moving, fast-reading novelet of a lawyer-detective...

Detective: SCOTT JORDAN

"Q"

What Maury Faber did was inexcusable. Perhaps even illegal. At 7:15 A.M. he used a passkey and invaded my hotel room. He clamped his fingers around my shoulder and unceremoniously shook me awake.

Three days ago I had checked into the Everglades Hotel on Florida's west coast for a week of rest and recreation, which meant sleeping until noon. Ordinarily I am not a slugabed, but I had just finished a long and complicated trial, working around the clock, in court during the day and studying transcripts at night.

So I bitterly resented the intrusion. Prying open a grainy eye, I gave the man a hard look. Almost any sight on God's green

footstool would be more pleasing than Faber's kisser first thing in the morning. It was pale and meaty, dominated by a heavy nose, and well matched to the short barrel-shaped body he invariably kept garbed in the latest most fashionable resort style. Acquiring a passkey had been no problem for Maury Faber. He was president and managing director of the joint.

"What the hell, Maury!" I said.

"Up." His voice was harshly urgent. "Get dressed, Jordan. I need you."

"It's unilateral. I don't need you, not at this hour."

"It's an emergency. A crisis. Please."

"I'm a lawyer, not a doctor."

"It's too late for doctors."

"Then call an undertaker. Damn it, Maury, I'm on vacation. Go away." I closed my eyes and rolled over.

He yanked the blanket away and dropped it on the floor. "You're a lawyer and right now that's what I need, Jordan—a lawyer. It's your job to help people in trouble, isn't it?"

"Why me?" I asked, my voice muffled against the pillow. "I'm not even admitted to the bar in this state. You've got a whole battery of lawyers down here."

"They know real estate, period. Conveyances, leases, mortgages. What do they know about homicide? Besides, the dead man is a friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Gifford—Sam Gifford."

I sat up, suddenly wide-awake. "What? What did you say?"

"I said Sam Gifford is dead."

"Oh, my God! How?"

"Shot."

"Where?"

"Through the head."

"I mean where did it happen?"

The question wrung an agonized groan from Faber. "In my wife's cabana," he said, and added hastily, "but that's not where he got it. He was shelved elsewhere and brought there."

I looked at him narrowly. "How do you know?"

"No blood in the cabana. Not a drop." Despite the air conditioning Faber's pores were exuding moisture. It glistened on his forehead and ran down his cheeks.

"How come you don't move him the hell out of there?"

"It's too late." He groaned again. "The chambermaid who found him started yelling and before we could do anything somebody called the law."

"All right, Maury. You don't miss much around here. I want the truth. Was your wife fooling around with Gifford?"

"Don't say that." His voice was up a full octave. "Don't even think it. Carmen doesn't fool around with the guests. Or anybody," he added hopefully. "She hardly knew the man." He pressed his palms together in a gesture of supplication. "Jordan, please. A favor. Name your own fee. Anything. I don't care."

One vacation shot to hell. I sighed and slid out of bed. "Okay. Let's see what's cooking."

He scuttled to the door and blocked my path. "Put some clothes on, for God's sake."

Which indicates the state of mind I was in.

Lieutenant George Ritchie was a leathery character, a native Floridian, a spare, tightlipped man with a flinty face hermetically sealed against any show of emotion. He had commandeered the manager's office and he showed himself briefly at the door, ordering one of his troopers to keep us outside until he finished interrogating Maury's wife.

It must have been a painful ordeal. Ultimately she emerged, pale and shaken. She threw us a helpless look and was quickly hustled away. Carmen Faber was a decorative item, with clothes by Givenchy and face by Max Factor. Exactly what you'd expect Maury to latch onto after his first wife yielded the ghost.

Ritchie glanced indifferently at my card. "New York lawyer," he said, sizing me up, then transferring his gaze to Faber. "You think you need a mouthpiece, Maury?"

"For advice, yes. I'm worried about the hotel. This is not exactly my idea of good publicity. Mr. Jordan happens to be here on vacation. He once did some work for me up north, so I asked him to sit in. Besides, he knew the victim."

"Ah. Well, we'll come to that in a moment. So you're worried about the hotel. Not your wife?"

"What's to worry, Lieutenant? She's clean."

"The body was found in her cabana."

"Found maybe, but not killed there."

Ritchie had obviously reached the same conclusion. "How well did she know this Gifford?"

"Hardly at all. He'd only been here a few days."

"I understand she had a few drinks with him."

"She enjoys mingling with the guests, makes them feel at home."

Ritchie shifted to me. "All right, Counselor. Would you care to brief me on the victim?"

I was going to do it whether I cared to or not. I said, "Samuel P. Gifford. Professional money raiser. He coaxes contributions out of prospective donors for political campaigns. He could charm the wallet away from the most confirmed miser."

"Was he down here on vacation or business?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. He asked to sit at my table and we exchanged only small talk."

"Any family you know of?"

"No."

"So who do we notify?"

"Try the Republican State Committee in New York," I said.

"How well did you know him?"

"I handled his divorce two years ago."

Ritchie nodded. "Wait here for me, Counselor." He headed for the door, beckoning to Faber. "Get me the key to Gifford's room. We'll have a look at that right now."

They marched out, leaving me alone. I sat behind the manager's desk and reached for the phone. I dialed the operator and got through to Mike Ryan at campaign headquarters for the reelection of Theodore Hoke Prentice to the United States Senate. Ryan was the senator's campaign manager. We exchanged amenities to background noises of ringing telephones and the busy chatter of many voices.

"You sound far away, Counselor," Ryan said. "Where are you calling from?"

"Florida."

"I guess I'm in the wrong business. Anything special on your mind?"

"Sam Gifford. Is he working for you at the moment?"

"He sure is. Matter of fact, he's in Florida right now."

"You can scratch him off the payroll."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"He's dead."

Silence. Static on the line for a few moments. I could picture Ryan's shocked face. When he finally got wired for sound he

asked for details. I gave him what I had, admittedly not much. He thought about it, then reached a decision, sounding subdued, "Would you look into it for us, Jordan?"

"I may not have enough time," I said. "I'm due back in New York at the end of the week."

"Then give it a few days. Please. We owe Gifford that much at least. And send your bill to the committee. I'm sure the senator will concur and he'd be most grateful."

I didn't mind having a U.S. senator in my debt, although in this instance I differed in almost every conceivable respect from any position Theodore Hoke Prentice had ever taken. He was a flag-waving reactionary, espousing tough law enforcement and weak labor unions. I already had a client, but there didn't seem to be any conflict of interest, so I agreed.

"I'll need some information, Mike."

"Shoot."

"Was Gifford down here on business?"

"Yes. He was trying to contact old Amos Rhodes. Does the name ring a bell?"

"Negative."

"That's understandable. Rhodes is a queer old duffer, sort of a recluse, been out of circulation for years. Made his pile on Wall Street, selling short before the crash of '29 and then riding it up during the long bull market of the fifties and sixties. After that he retired. Divides his time now between Florida and a place down in Mexico—wait a minute, I have it on a piece of paper—town called San Miguel Allende.

"Just before the election four years ago he sent Prentice a letter praising the senator's voting record. We turned it over to Gifford, thinking Rhodes might be good for a contribution. The letter was postmarked Palm City, Florida. Gifford flew down there, got an interview with Rhodes, put the bite on him, and what do you know, the old man coughed up twenty-five grand. That's a lot of beans, Counselor.

"So now with the senator up for reelection, we thought Rhodes might shell out again. But he failed to answer our letters and Gifford decided to fly down last week and see him personally. You know the score, Jordan. Advertising and TV spots skyrocketing in cost, we need all the financial help we can get."

"Any luck?"

"So far Gifford hadn't notified us. But our boy was a bulldog.

He didn't discourage easily and whatever the difficulty he'd be hanging in there making his pitch until the subject came across or dropped dead from a heart attack."

"Just for the record, did Gifford have any enemies?"

Ryan hesitated. "Not down there certainly, but Sam was a notorious chaser, as you probably know, which could mean husband trouble."

"How about Rhodes? Does he have a wife?"

Ryan chuckled. "Amos Rhodes is well over eighty, and a bachelor. Look, Jordan, can you soft-pedal this thing where the senator is concerned?"

I was silent. Theodore Hoke Prentice was no favorite of mine. After a moment I said, "This is not my bailiwick. I carry no clout down here. If it doesn't come up, I won't mention it." And on that note we hung up.

In the morgue of the local newspaper I found only one item on Amos Rhodes, written six years ago. Some enterprising lensman had managed a quick shot of him through the the window of a limousine. The caption stated that he had arrived on his annual hegira to the isolated estate 14 miles inland. Even then he was a parched and rheumy-eyed antique with patches of flour-white hair clinging to a pale and bony skull.

Anyone who can dash off a check for \$25,000 probably had local bank connections. Maury Faber arranged a meeting for me with an official of the First Florida Trust, housed in a small limestone structure, pseudo-Moorish in style. I have found that bankers generally disgorge information with all the abandon of a slot machine, but the Everglades Hotel was First Florida Trust's largest depositor and Mr. Briscoe anxiously wished to retain Maury Faber's good will; so he agreed to cooperate so long as he did not have to breach conventional ethics. A thin seamed man with a lidless stare, he conceded that Amos Rhodes did have an account at the bank.

"Have you ever met him personally?" I asked.

"Once. When he opened the account ten years ago."

"And he's made regular deposits since that time?"

"Yes, on a monthly basis whenever he's in Florida—until quite recently, that is."

"But not in person, I take it."

"No, sir. Sometimes by mail, and sometimes his housekeeper,

Mrs. Alma Hull, would drive into Palm City to shop, make a deposit, and cash one of his checks. But the account has been rather dormant lately and I suspect Mr. Rhodes must have made other arrangements."

"What is the current source of his income? Dividends, bond interest?"

A look of intense pain crossed Briscoe's face as he shook his head. "Mr. Jordan, I shouldn't be saying this, but it's my impression Mr. Rhodes has become senile. He seems to have liquidated all his holdings and used the cash to buy himself a straight life annuity with an insurance company. I'm sure you know what that means."

I nodded. "The investor turns his money over to the company in exchange for a guaranteed lifetime income. If he's old enough he gets the highest possible income, and when he dies that finishes it. No refund, no estate, nothing. The insurance company keeps the rest of the investment."

It turned Briscoe livid. "Asinine," he said, resentment shading into outrage. "Utter fiscal imbecility. He must have developed hardening of the brain."

I knew what ailed the man. How could banks lend money at a profit if depositors placed their funds elsewhere? "Did you make inquiries?"

"Yes. I was curious about it. A man sharp enough to make all that money in the first place had to have some sense. Well, sir, we do some business with the insurance company and my contact there told me that Mr. Rhodes is afflicted with a certain phobia. He dies a little every time he has to pay taxes. That's a fairly common disorder, except Rhodes had it to the point of monomania. In his bracket he considered the government bite confiscatory. He was positively paranoid about it. So he turned to an annuity."

I mulled it over. To an eccentric like Rhodes it probably made sense. At his advanced age he might get fourteen percent on his investment. And since the Internal Revenue Service considered this income a partial return of capital, most of it would be tax deductible. And since Rhodes had no family or relatives, why leave an estate? He'd have a princely income for life all to himself. And he could squander it as he pleased, including making contributions to the campaign of Senator Theodore Hoke Prentice.

At my request Briscoe drew a road map of the area marked

with arrows and instructions on how to reach the Rhodes retreat. The local Hertz office provided me with a rental car and I took off.

For seclusion the old man had picked an ideal spot. I had to drive inland along a canal, past pine and palmetto scrub. An occasional oak bearded with Spanish moss lined the neglected blacktop. There was almost no traffic in either direction. In the distance I spied a blue heron stalking the shallows.

I found the Rhodes place guarded by a stone wall with a wrought-iron gate. It was not locked, so I drove through. Hibiscus hedges concealed the lower half of a rambling structure. I pulled up under a porte-cochère alongside a shining new sports car.

As I climbed out of my rental a young man in a white T-shirt emerged from the front door and slouched down the steps to head me off. He was deeply bronzed and heavily muscled, with slate-colored eyes under a dark ridge of brow. "Something I can do for you?" he asked politely.

"I'd like to see Mr. Amos Rhodes."

"Do you have an appointment?"

I shook my head and offered one of my cards. "I've come a long way and it's important."

He smiled apologetically. "Well, Mr. Jordan, if my vocal cords were up to it I'd be happy to give him your message."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"It's simple. Mr. Rhodes returned to his villa in Mexico two days ago."

"I see. Are you the caretaker here?"

"You might say that. My mother works for Mr. Rhodes and he allows me to stay at the place whenever he's away."

"Then your name must be Hull."

"Correct. Burt Hull."

"Perhaps you can help me. Have you been here during the past week?"

"I have."

"Would you know if a man named Sam Gifford drove out to see Mr. Rhodes?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance. Mr. Rhodes doesn't like visitors. He hasn't permitted a stranger to see him in over a year."

"How long will he be staying in Mexico?"

"Permanently. That's a decision he made some time ago. He prefers the climate down there. As a matter of fact, he's asked me

to put this house on the market and I'll be talking to real estate agents in the next few days." Burt Hull kept smiling; arms folded across his chest.

I thanked him and went back to the car.

Faber was pacing back and forth in his lobby like a big cat whose cage has been missed at feeding time. He ran over and clamped his fingers on my arm. Agitation made him almost incoherent.

"Slow down, Maury," I said soothingly. "Remember, you have high blood pressure. You'll pop a blood vessel. What's eating you?"

"They took Carmen away. Lieutenant Ritchie is holding her as a material witness. You gotta do something, Jordan. You gotta spring her. All this luxury around here; she's not used to a cell. She'll go bananas. She—"

I cut him short. "Does he have any new evidence?"

Faber looked ill, his eyelids twitching. "They found a ring under the corner of a rug in Gifford's room. A three-carat solitaire I bought her last year in Palm Beach. She swears she never went to Gifford's room, but Ritchie won't listen. He doesn't believe her."

I thought about it. Holding Carmen was the lieutenant's way of taking her out of circulation while he tried to build a case. A writ of habeas corpus might bring her home, but I had no time to fool around with legal formalities. Faber's local talent could handle that angle and I told him so. I pointed to the desk of a travel agent in the far corner of the lobby.

"Do you have an account with that outfit?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I want you to get me on the first available flight to Mexico City." I forestalled his objections with an upraised hand. "I'm not looking for a free trip, Maury. I have to go down there for some information about Gifford. Relax. I should be back in a few days."

He was dubious and confused. When he saw that I was implacable, he relented, shrugged in resignation, and headed for the travel desk. Fifteen minutes later he brought a round-trip ticket to my room.

"You'll need a tourist card," he told me. "The man says you can pick one up at the Mexican Tourist Department in Miami. Your plane leaves from Miami International tomorrow morning. Start packing."

The Eastern Airlines jet dipped into the terminal leg of its landing pattern and I heard the flaps thump as the pilot lowered them to reduce air speed. We hit the runway without a bounce, high on the central plateau, still almost a mile and a half above sea level. I moved my watch back one hour. Customs was a brief formality and the hotel room Faber had reserved for me was a pleasant surprise.

Early the next morning I was on a bus heading north. I had planned on renting a car, but one look at the suicidal machismo of Mexican drivers dissuaded me. The bus was air conditioned and had a stewardess who served coffee and cold drinks.

We sped northwest on a good highway, cutting through dry plains blistered by a remorseless sun and dotted in the distance by shapeless villages. Four hours later, from the crest of a steep hill, I spotted San Miguel Allende, a Colonial town that looked as if it hadn't changed for generations.

I'd heard it was an expatriate haven for pensioners, artists, writers, and a sprinkling of that ubiquitous breed of hirsute youngsters.

The bus wound down cobbled streets past pink, yellow, and salmon walls that insure the privacy of the houses within. Church-bells were pealing for no apparent reason, certainly not for my arrival. Despite all the resident gringos, it was a totally alien culture. I saw Indios in wide-brimmed straw hats, women with rebozos, squatting mendicants, and ragged boys hawking gum and an English-language newspaper which I later found was of limited interest.

On the Plaza Principal I checked into the San Francisco Hotel and then spent the rest of the day familiarizing myself with the terrain. Late in the afternoon I settled myself at a conspicuous table of a sidewalk café, ordered Mexican beer, and put a warm friendly smile on my face. In due course I struck up a conversation with a middle-aged couple who had retired to San Miguel a few years ago, had not returned to the United States since, and were starved for gossip about New York. I regaled them with stories for half an hour and eventually got what I needed.

Their local lawyer represented a large segment of the American community. Still active at 70 he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the town and its population. They said they would arrange an appointment for me and told me to be at his office at eleven the next morning.

Senor Ignacio Arruza, *el abogado*, was a gnarled and fragile antique with the courtly manners of a Spanish grandee. His office contained only the barest essentials, but the furnishings beneath his scalp seemed more than adequate. And his English was far better than my Spanish. After exchanging a few legal bromides he asked, "In what way, Senor Jordan, may I serve you?"

"There is a *norteamericano* here named Amos Rhodes. Do you know him?"

Arruza nodded, informing me that he had handled details for the purchase of the Rhodes villa in San Miguel, ownership of property being a complicated procedure for foreigners. "It has been many years now and there have been no legal problems since. Senor Rhodes is a man of much privacy. He is old, much older than myself. He does not mingle with his countrymen. He secludes himself behind the walls of his villa. His *enferman*, a sort of nurse and housekeeper, takes care of him. Heavy work and marketing is usually done by a *criada*, a maid."

"A Mrs. Hull is the nurse-housekeeper?"

"That is so. A silent one, a sour creature, not friendly."

"What about the maid?"

Senor Arruza displayed fine porcelain dentures with a gold tooth winking among them. "Ah, Senor Jordan. Maria Sanchez, a most splendid one. But she is no longer employed. She has been dismissed. I saw her strolling in the Jardin yesterday and we spoke. The Hull woman told her to leave and Maria does not know why."

"Has anyone taken her place?"

"Maria says no. Perhaps they are economizing." Arruza frowned. "But that would be most unusual. Help here is inexpensive." He gave me a short course on the attractions of the dollar vis-a-vis the peso. "Most *norteamericanos* have several *criadas* working for them. There is no industry in San Miguel and the local girls need work."

I asked him how to find the Rhodes villa and he wrote out precise instructions in Spanish, suggesting that I use one of the taxis on the Plaza.

The taxi, a junkyard relic, rattled ominously on the rough cobblestones, but its engine had apparently been tended with loving skill, and it pulled us up a steep hill to a sparsely settled area, stopping finally at high cement wall that must have been built about the time Juarez finished off Maximilian.

"You will be long, Senor?" the driver asked. "Perhaps I should wait for you."

"*Por favor.*"

Above a door of heavy zebra wood dangled a pullcord that jangled a bell somewhere inside. I kept it working until the upper half of the door opened to reveal the solid torso of a woman in her fifties. Thin-lipped, stern-visaged, an American-Gothic face, inhospitable, and armored against any show of emotion or civility.

"Mrs. Hull?" I asked.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I'd like to see Amos Rhodes."

"Mr. Rhodes does not care to see anyone. Who are you?"

"I'm an attorney. I've come a long way on an important matter."

"Important to you perhaps, not to Mr. Rhodes."

"Would you tell him that I'm here on behalf of Theodore Hoke Prentice, a member of the United States Senate?" I handed her a card.

"Wait here." The door snapped shut in my face.

It was hot and I began to perspire. Five minutes later she appeared again. "Mr. Rhodes says he never heard of you. American politics no longer interests him. He wishes to be left alone." This time the door closed with unchallengeable finality.

I turned and saw the driver hunkered down under a tree. A motionless car under the Mexican sun quickly becomes an oven. He held the door for me and my pores opened wide. To save fuel we coasted down the long hill.

"Would you know a girl named Maria Sanchez?"

"Si, Senor. She is the friend of my daughter. They walk together on the *paseo*." He explained that most of the town's younger population congregated there on Saturday evenings in the traditional ritual of circling the Jardin, boys strolling in one direction, girls in the other.

"This is the same girl who worked for Senor Rhodes?"

"Si. But no longer. She was—how you call it?—fired."

"You know where she lives?"

"Less than a mile away, Senor."

"Please take me there."

At the bottom of the hill he turned onto a rutted road and presently pulled up at a cluster of adobe structures. Two goats and a cow wandered aimlessly on the unpaved street. Large-eyed, im-

passively solemn children gathered to watch us. My driver entered one of the houses. In a moment he emerged, trailed by a young girl, exuberantly healthy, who acknowledged my bow with an ear-to-ear smile.

"This is Maria Sanchez, Senor. She does not have much English."

What she had was about four words, so I drafted the driver as an interpreter. He rattled my inquiries in Spanish and got back rapid-fire replies. They raced their words as if the devil were chasing each phrase.

"Maria says that Senora Hull arrived two days ago. *Solo*. Alone. Senor Rhodes did not come with her. She told Maria that he had remained in the states because he was too ill to travel. Maria was not surprised. She says the *patron* was very sick when they left here to go to the states. We have many fine *medicos* here in San Miguel, but Senora Hull did not trust them." He shrugged. "For one person a maid was not necessary, so Maria was dismissed."

I produced a twenty-dollar bill. "Mr. Rhodes would like Senorita Sanchez to have severance pay."

When the girl understood, she put her hands behind her back, shaking her head.

The driver apologized. "She says it would be charity, Senor. She has not earned the money and she will not take it."

I did not offend her by insisting. "*Muchas gracias, Senorita,*" I said gravely and climbed back into the cab. The driver looked at me. "The office of *el abogado*, Ignacio Arruza," I told him. "And where did you learn your English?"

"Migrant farm worker in the states," he grinned. "And driving a hack in El Paso."

When I added a tip to his fare, an unusual procedure in Mexico, he shook my hand gratefully. I found Senor Arruza dozing at his desk. I sat across him and waited quietly. In five minutes one eye opened and the eyebrow above it lifted inquiringly.

"Would it be possible to find out whether Senor Rhodes arrived in this country on a specific day earlier this week?"

"There are many points of entry, Senor Jordan."

"He would have flown from Miami to Mexico City."

That simplified it. Arruza spread his fingers. If modest sums of money were to change hands, he explained, the money to be judiciously distributed, certain bureaucrats would undoubtedly be inclined to cooperate. He gave me an approximate total figure and I

placed the cash on his desk. He had a contact in Mexico City who would take care of it at once.

Outside, the sun was now directly overhead and stores were shuttering for the afternoon siesta. I crossed the Plaza to my hotel and stretched out to indulge in the local custom. Before sleep came I pondered the situation. Burt Hull had claimed Amos Rhodes was in Mexico. Mrs. Hull had tried to give the impression he was in seclusion in his villa. But according to what she had told Maria Sanchez, Rhodes had never arrived in San Miguel. So somebody was lying. And I didn't think it was Maria.

Afternoon shadows had darkened the room when Senor Arruza's call awakened me. He'd heard from his contact at the capital. Mrs. Alma Hull, he told me, had flown down by herself from Miami via Aero de Mexico. Amos Rhodes had not been on the plane and there was no record of his arrival.

That was all I needed to know.

So it was time to leave. I now had plenty of assumptions and a few conclusions, but nothing solid enough to assure Lieutenant Ritchie's cooperation. What I needed was a court order. But no judge in his right mind would sign the necessary papers based only on wild speculation.

From behind his desk at the First Florida Trust in Palm City, Mr. Briscoe regarded me without pleasure. As I spoke, he went through a whole series of emotional changes—annoyance, resentment, uneasiness, and finally irresolution. It took me nearly a half hour to convince him that his records were not sacrosanct, that sooner or later, one way or another, if not at my request, then at the request of the local prosecutor, he would have to comply.

Ultimately he called a filing clerk and gave instructions. Records were brought. Amos Rhodes had received a monthly check from an insurance company in payment of his annuity contract. A number of these had been deposited to his account at the First Florida Trust. Before clearing, they had been microfilmed. Briscoe had enlarged copies of the first two and the last three.

I brought them back to my room at the Everglades. I am not a handwriting expert, but in a recent case involving a forged will I had been carefully coached by one of the best. I placed the last three checks on top of each other and held them flat against a window pane, shifting them until the endorsed signatures of

Amos Rhodes were precisely superimposed. An expert would have used an oblique sheet of glass illuminated from behind by a bright lamp. The windowpane was primitive but adequate.

I knew that it is impossible for anyone to sign his or her name twice in exactly the same way. Yet in each of the three superimposed signatures I could not detect a single millimeter's difference in the shape or size of the letters.

So they had all been traced from a single writing, probably an authentic one, in the hand of Amos Rhodes.

The next step called for a search warrant on the application of a law-enforcement official. I took my theories and the copies of the canceled checks to Lieutenant Ritchie. He listened without expression. His narrowed eyes studied the checks. It changed the shape of his mouth, pulling it tight. "I'm calling the county attorney in on this," he said. "Any objections?"

"It's your bailiwick."

He stood up. "We'll get a court order and go over there tomorrow morning."

"Am I invited?"

"Be on deck here at ten A.M. sharp."

"Would it be possible to release Mrs. Faber?"

"Not now. She stays on ice until we see what turns up."

There were five of us in the official car—myself, Lieutenant Ritchie, two of his deputies, and an eager young assistant county attorney. We drove past marshland to the Amos Rhodes estate. Burt Hull's sports car was parked in the courtyard. No one answered the doorbell. I imagined him peering through a window, hoping we would depart.

Ritchie nodded to one of his deputies. "Hit it, Brubaack."

The deputy backed up and launched 200 pounds of bulk at the door. On his second try it flew open, splintering wood around the lock. They drew their guns and went in at a crouch. No one was at home.

I went out to the terrace, sat on a canvas chair, and watched the deputies remove two sharp-edged spades from the trunk compartment of Ritchie's car. The Lieutenant was prowling the grounds like a bloodhound. Finally he paused near one of the hedges and gestured. The men began to dig. They got down pretty deep. Ritchie peered sourly into the hole and then indicated another spot. An hour later the deputies looked discouraged.

I wandered over. "You're not going to find anything."

Ritchie gave me a startled look.

"Burt Hull is not an idiot," I said. "We're close to alligator country. I think Amos Rhodes has long since been digested. If you could drain the swamps you might find his skeleton. Hull would have had to cart the body off in a car, that sports job, so there might be some evidence there."

Ritchie nodded. "We'll impound it for the lab boys, but let's have a quick look first."

They examined the interior. Then Bruback used the spade to spring the lid of the trunk. Ritchie rummaged around. He hefted a small bundle of rags and when he unwrapped it a revolver was resting on his palm.

"Well, now," he said: "The counselor may be onto something. A .32 caliber Short Colt, taking a .315 diameter bullet. Which squares exactly with the slug we dug out of your friend Sam Gifford."

The county attorney grew excited. "A ballistics check would lock it up. Let's go back and do it now."

Ritchie shook his head. "Burt Hull is in the area. He can't be far off without wheels. If he comes back and finds the house door broken and his car missing he'll hightail it out of here fast. So we sit tight and put the arm on him when he shows."

He deployed his men out of sight and stationed me and the county attorney at different windows. I was on my third cigarette when Hull sauntered in off the road. They let him get close. Then I saw Bruback materialize behind him and the other deputy move in at an angle. Ritchie stepped out on the terrace.

Hull pulled up short. His head swiveled and he saw the deputies. He protested, smiling tautly, as they hustled him into the house. "Hey, now! What goes on here? What's this all about?"

"We're trying to locate Mr. Amos Rhodes," Ritchie said.

"That's easy. He's in Mexico."

"No," I said. "Hasn't your mother called to tell you I was down there?"

"All right. Where do you think he is?"

"Rotting in some nearby swamp—what's left of him anyway."

Hull met my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a dead man. Amos Rhodes. A man who probably died from old age. But you and your mother decided to keep it a secret. Because once the news was out it would cut off the

income. All those monthly payments on his nice fat lifetime annuity—they'd all stop. So you never told anyone and carted off the body and fed it to the big lizards. That kept the checks coming and you and your mother continued to cash them."

The taut smile congealed. Hull turned to Ritchie. "This guy is crazy."

"It won't wash," I said. "The Mexicans are sticklers for paperwork. There's no record Rhodes ever arrived down there. You're caught, Hull. You want to throw off the hook, produce him."

"I don't have to produce him. Mr. Rhodes is a free agent. He wants to go somewhere else, that's his privilege."

"He was an old man. Sick. Helpless. Unable to take care of himself. Where could he go without your mother's help?"

"Maybe he hired somebody else."

"Then why did she lie and give the impression he was in San Miguel?"

"That's your story. She'll say otherwise."

"You still insist Rhodes is alive?"

"Yes."

"Where is he getting money? Who's supporting him?"

"That annuity you were talking about."

"Impossible. Somebody's been forging his endorsements and pinching the cash. If Rhodes is alive, why didn't he complain to the insurance company?"

Hull gave a forced and hollow laugh, but bubbles of sweat had broken out on his forehead. "How do I know? He never consulted me about his problems. For all I know you may be lying about the forgeries."

"No, sir. We have evidence that will convince the insurance company. And they'll stop payment pending an investigation."

"I welcome it."

"Even if it includes the murder of Sam Gifford?"

"Now, wait a minute! You can't tie me into that."

"We can tie you into possession of the murder gun," Ritchie said. "A Short Colt we found in your car. Exactly the type of weapon that killed Gifford."

It jolted him, draining the blood from his face. His voice shook. "Why would I kill the man? Hell, I didn't even know him."

"Because he came down here to put the bite on Rhodes for a campaign contribution. You tried to fob him off, but he wouldn't

let go. A Gifford characteristic. He began nosing around, got wind of something, and suddenly it looked like the end of the ball game for you. You were afraid he'd blow the whistle, so you had to silence him. You killed him and then tried to throw a curve by dumping him in Mrs. Faber's cabana because you saw them having a drink together at the Everglades bar."

He swallowed painfully. "You can't prove anything like that."

"Your gun will prove it for us. When ballistics matches it with the slug found in Gifford's skull you're sunk, finished, kaput."

He knew what ballistics would show and his body sagged. His eyes were bankrupt.

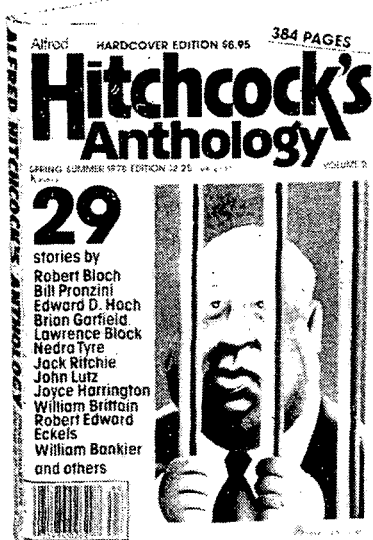
Ritchie said, "You'll have your day in court, mister. That's more than you gave Gifford."

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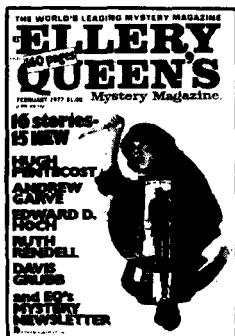
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